



FROM “MEANING” TO REALITY: TOWARD A POLANIAN COGNITIVE THEORY OF LITERATURE



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ABSTRACT

This essay articulates a theory and practice of “reading toward reality” based on Polanyi’s conception of scientific discovery as proceeding from the apprehension of problems, guided by our tacit intimations of a new coherence that would resolve these problems, and a reality as the condition of such inquiry. I argue that, analogously, (good) literature poses problems of sense that refer us to our own tacit knowledge of the normative conditions of sense—conditions which underlie and sometimes contradict our conventional modes of sensemaking. Literature thus can educate us to those human realities which underlie our everyday social world and to the conditions by which we might more adequately judge and make sense of our experience.

In the February 2019 issue of *TAD*, Jean Bocharova, Stanley Scott, Martin E. Turkis II, and Jon Fennell articulated aspects of a Polanian theory (or theories) of literature, elaborating on Polanyi’s own remarks on literature (primarily in *Meaning*) to show how literary works engage our tacit knowledge to move us toward an apprehension of more comprehensive and deeper truths.

I am generally in sympathy with the arguments presented in these papers, but I believe that the most comprehensive, rigorous and valuable application of Polanyi’s

ideas to the study of literature depends on the following additional components, which I will develop in this essay:

1. Literature occasions not only *meaning* but *knowledge*—knowledge of human *realities* and the conditions of making sense of human experience and human life.
2. An adequate characterization of the kind of reality to which literature educates us requires:
 - a. A theory of social construction, which explains why our ordinary everyday way of apprehending the world is inadequate.
 - b. A theory of modernity, which explains why we especially need art now to direct us to the real conditions of our humanity.
 - c. The conception of the *conditions of sense*, which retrieves the reality we apprehend from the realm of the mystical (though it remains, in a non-supernatural sense, transcendent).
3. The essential importance of a practice of reading and reflection to transforming the experience of reading into *knowledge*. While the experience of the work *per se* may occasion a new tacit integration, it is our efforts to make sense of and to judge the work—to articulate what we apprehend in and through it—which transforms our tacit intimations into knowledge.

Reading Literature and Knowing

I begin from what I believe to be a common experience: that in reading fiction or poetry, one comes to *know* something—to confront some reality or truth which bears upon our understanding of our own situation or the conditions of human life—a reality or truth which, furthermore, could not have been conveyed merely by propositions or discursive prose. Many literary theorists and critics hold such a position, explicitly or implicitly, but there is little agreement about the character of this knowledge or the “mechanism” by which we acquire it.

In contemporary analytic aesthetic philosophy, the view that literature conveys some truth or reality has come to be called, for better or worse, “literary cognitivism.” Conceptions of literary truth must answer several challenges. One is the question of how literature can be said to *teach* us, since, if we judge what it presents to be plausible, we are referring to something we already know (or believe) (a version of Meno’s paradox). A second question is whether and why we should need literature, rather than just the human sciences, reportage and our own experience, to learn it—that is, whether and how reading literature constitutes a *distinctive* mode of coming-to-know.¹ I propose that Polanyi’s work provides the basis for an answer to these challenges and for a compelling cognitive theory of literature, as well as suggesting a practice of reading by which literature educates us to human realities and to the conditions of sense.²

Polanyi's foundational contributions to the philosophy of knowledge are the correlate ideas of the tacit dimension and of "personal knowledge:" that all knowledge, even that which we take to be most "objective" (paradigmatically, scientific knowledge) is inextricably "personal"—that is, embodied in an individual—because it rests on an irreducibly *tacit* dimension that cannot be wholly formalized. This provides the basis for Polanyi's solution to the general problem of Meno's paradox: it is our tacit intimation of a solution to a problem that allows us to look for and recognize that solution. It also suggests that humanistic knowledge can be just as much *knowledge* as what we come to know through science, because the latter too rests on grounds that cannot be fully proved through logic and empirical data.

In his lectures on "Meaning" and the book of the same name into which these lectures were edited by Harry Prosch, Polanyi further develops his account of those "coherences that are thought by us to be artificial, not natural," including those of art, religion, and morality—an account that allows us to believe in the reality these coherences in fact appear to us to have, a reality which in modernity has fallen under suspicion because "they seem to be creations of our own, not subject to the external checks of nature—and therefore to be wholly creatures of our own subjective whims and desires" (*M*, 67). Polanyi sets out to offer "a theory of these meanings that explains how their coherence is no less real than the perceptual and scientific coherences [we] so readily [accept]," a theory which will uphold the legitimacy of the substantial role played by "personal knowledge" in our apprehension of those realities mediated or constituted by culture.

For Polanyi, to find something meaningful is to recognize it as part of a larger whole, and the whole that constitutes the meaning and reality of the work of art (including literature) is an integration of the features of the work (plot, figuration, etc.), on the one hand, and the feelings and experience of the reader (or viewer, listener, etc.) on the other. "[I]n our grasp of the reality of a poem," Polanyi writes,

[t]he poem takes us out of the diffuse existence of our ordinary life into something clearly beyond this and draws from the great store of our inchoate emotional experiences a circumscribed unity of passionate feelings. First the artist produces from his own diffuse existence a shape circumscribed in a brief space and a short time—a shape wholly incommensurable with the substance of its origins. Then we respond to this shape by surrendering from our own diffuse memories of moving events a gift of purely resonant feelings. The total experience is of a wholly novel entity, an imaginative integration of incompatibles on all sides (*M*, 88).

The work of art is therefore a *sui generis* reality, not to be reduced to a symptom of the artist's psychology or biography or historical period or the viewer's purely subjective fancy. But Polanyi does not make fully clear the kind of relationship the artwork has to our lived lives: whether or how it refers to or can reveal something about the world we inhabit, or whether rather it simply creates a new and powerful reality of its own which we experience in our encounter with it. I want to argue that we *do*—or can—derive knowledge about the real conditions of our lives from art, but to see this we need to draw anew from Polanyi's more general theory of discovery and reality, and specifically to apply to literature his argument that inquiry proceeds through perceiving problems and the gradient of increasing coherence that would resolve those problems.

From Meaning to Reality

Literature can be and has been conceived posing as hypothetical problems that refer to real-world conditions (as Aristotle argued, it is “philosophical”—and mimetic—in that it represents “the kind of thing that *would* happen”). Anna Karenina's suicide, for instance, might force us to recognize certain constraints on the pursuit of personal happiness (as well as the oppressiveness and sexism of 19th-century Russian society); we recognize as plausible her destruction by the costs of her affair and the failure of that affair to conform to her fantasies. I will argue that literature educates by confronting us with problems, though I contend that what we encounter in literature is not just a set of vicarious experiences that are “broadening” (and challenging) simply in the way that real life experiences might be, allowing us to “travel” through other lives and times and places. Beyond this, literature necessarily—by definition—refers us to a reality in excess of everyday reality. It promises a further coherence than that which we ordinarily inhabit, and its form—its plot, imagery, and other formal features—orients us toward this further coherence.

How does it do this? To begin with, even the realist novel and other genres that aim to represent or imitate “real life” differ from life minimally in that they have an intentional form: they are narrated; they have a plot with a beginning, middle and end; certain details and events are included and described in a particular way, implying some principle of unity.

One could argue that this kind of narrative coherence belongs precisely to art and therefore has no implications for our understanding of life outside of art—that art is art because it has *artificial* form. Real life, as it is in vogue to say, is “messy,” full of loose ends and unintegrated fragments and lacking neat resolution. But if human beings are teleological creatures—if we cannot understand human action without reference to both immediate and more distant ends—then the conditions of sense of human life are narratological; narrative arcs are not *imposed* upon human reality, but rather are constitutive of it.

Our lives have a minimal narrative coherence provided by the societies in which we live, but—as I will develop further on—the social narratives we inherit are necessarily inadequate to our experience, typified and sometimes distorting. Narratives make their claim to literary merit in part by offering more adequate conceptions of human ends and the constraints upon and complexities and ambiguities of pursuing those ends within a given situation. (Modernist works work against our expectations of a certain kind of unity, implying the need for a yet different ground.)

But literature's capacity to suggest a different ground of sense and judgment does not just arise from its superior treatment of the complexities and nuances of human experience. More fundamentally, literary narratives and images, if they are truly literary, are not immediately and fully comprehensible—the motives of the characters and the significance of the actions and events are not obvious or unambiguous, nor are the meanings and referents of images and descriptions. I propose that this is entailed by calling a work "literature." If everything about a work appears utterly transparent, if it leaves no uncertainty or question in the mind of the reader, if it seems to suggest nothing beyond what can be immediately understood, either the work is not art or the reader lacks a certain sensitivity.

Thus, in reading literature we are compelled to try to *make sense* of what we read—in two dimensions, the horizontal or syntagmatic unfolding of the story, and the vertical or paradigmatic dimension of the meaning of particular images or descriptions. With respect to narrative, *making sense* means following the story: understanding why A follows B, the significance of each successive action and event and how it reflects back on what came before it—grasping the dramatic problem and understanding whether and how the problem is resolved. With respect to image and description, making sense means grasping what is being depicted or described—understanding its referent, meaning and significance.

At the same time, even what is unclear or ambiguous in a work of literature has to strike us with a certain rightness for us to accept it as art and not dismiss it (this will depend on a certain education and cultivated sensibility, especially for modernist works). That rightness may also be understood as the tacit coherence or integration occasioned by the work—something about this way of representing things allows for the apprehension of new and significant aspects of our experience and the human world. The reality we come to know through the work is the condition of that sense of rightness—the condition of the significant and illuminating connections we find between the work and my life or the world. If I see or read *Waiting for Godot* and find it to be a realistic depiction of something in my experience, fantastic and bizarre as it may be, then the reality I come to know through it is whatever it is about my experience that makes the play seem a compelling representation of it—for instance, the absence of any

transcendent authority or sanction for our lives, and the distortions that arise from that absence and from our longing and need for something to fill it.

It is this ambiguous-yet-evocative character of literature, its representation of human realities through narrative and image rather than its statement of fact through propositions, that makes it so that literature can direct us to a different ground of sense. In Polanyian terms, the work both poses problems and indicates something of the direction in which the “solution” lies—what the character of reality must be such that it can be thusly represented.

Consider the following passage, from Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, describing the passage of the filibusters³ through the Mexican desert:

That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses’ trapplings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunder-heads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream (McCarthy 1979, 50).

As we attend from the text to what it describes, we dwell tacitly in our knowledge of the English language and of literature from the Bible to Melville and Faulkner, the meanings and connotations of words, the workings of figurative speech, as well as our knowledge and experience of horse riding and Mexico and weather—and fear—and we integrate all these tacit or subsidiary particulars into some comprehensive unified (joint) meaning. If we were reading the passage in context, what had come before (and, if we’d read it before, what came after as well) would also figure in: the rest of the text would be part of the implicit background out of which we read, and part of the comprehensive whole we were working to construct—the meaning of the work as a whole.

With respect to this passage, one might initially think that the comprehensive meaning that integrates its particulars is essentially an action: horsemen riding through a particular landscape (with all the particular features described). But it is not hard, I think, to see that there is much that such a construction does not comprehend.

The explicit object of the description—what it represents—is men riding their horses through the desert, but the passage is *about* something more and other than this.

We sense this, in part, because of the strangeness of the language, even the peculiarity of the syntax—if the passage were just about the action and landscape it describes, then “electric, wild region” would do just as well as “region electric and wild,” and so on. Even more obviously unintegrated in the literal reading would be the figurative references to “absolute night” and “some demon kingdom.”

A more sophisticated reading might say that the passage represents men riding through an *eerie and threatening* landscape, and the language “imitates” that sense of dark enchantment that perhaps the men feel, or perhaps the author just wants the reader to feel—the rhythm of the parataxis (“stark and black and livid,” “trace nor stone nor ruin”) has a hypnotic effect, while “absolute night” and “demon kingdom” evoke an infernal otherworld.

Few, I think, would disagree that McCarthy here weaves a vivid image, however characterized, but the question then is: where does *reality* come into it? If, following Polanyi, we are to see the ambiguities of the passage as clues, to see the passage as “an aspect of reality,” what is the whole, the “comprehensive entity,” of which it is an aspect?

One answer would be *the work*, and it is certainly true that we attend from the particulars of one passage to an understanding of the work as a whole. But it is important to see that “the work” is not equivalent and limited to the text and its meaning; we might call the comprehensive whole the *form* of the work.⁴ The form, in this sense, would be what we know—all that we know—when we claim to know a work. It includes the text and its meanings, but goes beyond them. One might say it is not empirical but ideal, as long as this is not understood to mean that the form is some metaphysical object. It is that to which we refer, for instance, when we judge *Moby Dick*'s Ahab a tragic hero or an embodiment of evil. On the one hand, the possibility of legitimate argument about such judgments indicates that the form is not given, but something arrived at through the reader's work of integration of the elements of the work into a whole. On the other, the fact that some interpretations are *not* defensible indicates that the judgment is not sheerly subjective. The form of the work, in this sense, may be close to Polanyi's conception of the “novel whole” created in the encounter of work and reader, cited above. But I think the concept of form, with its connotation of both artistic structure and of “ideal form” (as in the Platonic *eidōs*) emphasizes how that “whole” is constrained by factors external to the individual and how the form refers (us) beyond the work to certain realities that constitute objective constraints upon our knowledge: general, if not universal, human realities. This is how the literary work can be not just *integrative* but *educative*: it not only integrates what we know and feel, but may compel us to recognize something that forces us to abandon a previously-held

position, by suggesting a coherence that is more comprehensive or bringing into view a facet of human life we had not known, acknowledged, or integrated—but recognize to be true or real when confronted with it.

As my account of reading the McCarthy passage implies, the work refers us not just to the objects of description within the story but to broader human realities: everything to which we must appeal to make sense of the story and to judge its importance and quality, including the literary tradition and those realities of human history and experience which literature thematizes (in McCarthy, one might say: colonialism, violence, enormity, apocalypse, etc.). Determining whether Ahab is a modern tragic hero or what kind of tragic hero he is requires that we refer not only to the tradition of tragedy but also to whether or what kind of tragedy is possible in modernity, which is a question about (among other things) the possibilities for extremity and greatness and the character of the constraints on human agency in modernity.

The work is a work of *literature* and not just entertainment in part because what it refers us to seems to be both real and important, because it has “something to say about the ‘human condition.’”⁵ “Something to say” is potentially misleading—the work is not an encoded message from author to audience, the work of reading aimed at getting back to some original intention of the author. But the point is that the work, if it is literature and not just a historical document, is not just an expression of the author’s beliefs or those of his time, but seems to be *about* something that still has bearing on our own understanding of “the human condition.” And it is that “something” which is the object to which we attend when we read and reflect on the work, if we are reading well.

That is to say, we could see the form of the work in turn as a clue to a further whole which comprehends *it*, as an aspect of some reality or realities—not what is explicitly described but, rather, the indeterminate reality to which the work seems to be a clue, the background implied by the narrative and images, the background against which the narrative and images make sense. I say “indeterminate” because, following Polanyi, that reality is not something given, something “out there” existing independently of the work and of our reading and reflection, our tacit integration. *It is what we come to know in reading, trying to understand, and judging the work*, which can never be exhaustively articulated but which will issue forth in a sense of greater coherence (and, as I will argue, the imperative to develop those capacities that will allow one to achieve a yet greater coherence).

To say that works of literature are those that have “something to say about the ‘human condition’” implies that they do not merely pose problems that demand a higher coherence, but that they indicate the direction in which the solution lies. We refer to reality in judging the deficiencies of a work of mediocre fiction, but good literature evokes the sense of a different order of coherence. It does this along both its

axes, horizontal—the “syntagmatic” or temporal dimension along which the story or plot unfolds—and the vertical—the “paradigmatic” dimension including description, figure, and image.

Plot is an implied coherence based on a dramatic problem and its resolution—the dramatic problem tends, in literature, to be rooted in a fundamental human problem. In understanding and judging the plot of a work we are educated to the conditions under which real conflict arises and according to which that conflict can be resolved—or not (in which case the story must find a different kind of “resolution”). Image, symbol, figure, and the other “vertical” elements of literature work to evoke the conditions according to which the unfolding of the plot makes sense, a “depth dimension” of imperatives, constraints, and realities which exceeds the world as we conventionally inhabit it.

In the McCarthy text, we are forced to seek a whole beyond the representation because otherwise we can’t make sense of—can’t integrate—the strange richness of the language and imagery. The passage evokes a terrifyingly unstable world against which the violence and cruelty of the story make a different kind of sense than that which we would initially attribute to it (simply the acts of barbarous, bad men)—it provides an image of a world bereft of sense and order. But if we come to *know* something about the conditions and tenuousness of human civilization, it is not because he gives us propositions about it—rather, it is the tacit integration that brings together image and story along with what we know about human beings and human history in a new (and potentially terrifying) coherence.

In sum: literature presents us with problems, implying the possibility of a solution, which in turn implies a further coherence, and the particular character of that coherence is suggested—but not given—by the form of the work. The way in which we come to know reality through literature is distinctive, different (though not necessarily radically discontinuous) from how we might come to know it through trying to make sense of events in our own life, because it is through the *activity* of reading, of struggling to make sense of plot and imagery, that we achieve a new tacit integration, not only of the particulars of the text but of the knowledge of human life, experience, and history that we bring to bear in that effort of understanding.

A Different Kind of Sense—Modern Social Reality

I have suggested that literature educates us to those aspects of “human reality” to which we do not ordinarily attend and which may be distorted or denied in our everyday world and everyday lives. I want now to argue that it makes sense to think of the reality to which we must make reference when we read—at least when we are reading a work *as literature*, rather than as historical document or psychological symptom etc.—as *sui generis*, that is, not just as neglected or repressed pieces of what would otherwise

be our everyday world, but a “different level” of reality. At the same time, I think it is possible to give an account of this reality that is not mystical.

Here too I will build on but go beyond a Polanyian concept: that of “emergence.”⁶ For Polanyi, the human world is a *sui generis* reality, dependent on the biological but not reducible to it. But I would suggest that it is useful to make a further distinction within the human realm between the social and a level that transcends the social which we might call “cultural” or simply “human.”

Our habitual ways of making sense of our experience depend upon the conventions into which we are socialized and these conventional understandings often prove to be inadequate to our experience, sometimes radically so. We can understand these conventions to belong to a certain “level” of reality which has been called “socially constructed reality.” In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe how the necessarily reductive typificatory schemes according to which we construe the world—from “marriage” and “justice” down to basic categories of gender—are *functional*, that while they are constrained by material and psychological realities (e.g., aging and death, a mother’s attachment to her children, etc.), they develop so as to support the stability of a particular society and the reproduction of its institutions.

From the constructivist perspective, the “moral sense,” which Polanyi identifies as the emergent property of properly human life, is distinct from animal instincts, but it is still not necessarily the “highest level” of human reality. For the very idea of social constructivism (especially the idea that ideals work to justify existing institutions, which means that they work to justify existing structures of power) suggests the possibility of—and generates the desire for—norms and standards which would not merely be relative to or functional for a given society but would be “really normative.” From Polanyi’s perspective, we could see the theory of social construction as posing a problem: if we recognize social reality to be constructed and yet can seemingly view and judge it from a perspective that transcends that construction, whence this perspective? Solving this problem would entail finding a higher level of coherence which would encompass, among other things, our capacity to recognize the social construction of reality, as well as our ability to critique the given norms. And that higher level of coherence would be, in Polanyi’s terms, a new level of *reality* which transcended the functional and conventional level.

It is this level of reality to which, I would argue, literature refers us: the reality that does not merely consist of the conventions that sustain the functioning of a given society, but which reaches back into history, forward into the human future, and “upward” or “downward” into those aspects of human experience that are unrecognized in the everyday social world. These include the normative constraints and demands we feel that are not adequately explained by and may even contradict conventional notions of

goodness, as well as realities such as death, aging, disability, catastrophe, unpredictable eros, inevitable dispossession.

The conventions of every hitherto existing human society have consisted in the kind of necessarily simplifying typification I have described. But I would make a more specific claim about the distortions of modern social reality and the nature of the alternative that we apprehend through good literature. Numerous social theorists and critics of the past century and a half have commented upon the modern reframing of problems in terms of utilitarianism and self-interest, what Max Weber referred to as the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality over value rationality. It may be that “rationalization,” as Weber terms it, has flattened the conventional ways of making sense of things—by which I mean, many things that were once considered holy or valuable in themselves now are increasingly evaluated based on their contributions to individual needs and wants and/or standards of productivity and efficiency, and eliminated or radically altered if found wanting in this regard (marriage, various religious rituals, dress code, social hierarchies). Many things once considered simply real in themselves are explained, or explained away, with reference to evolution, psychology, arbitrary environmental or cultural factors. What remains widely recognized as real is the individual person and her intentions, desires, and passions; what remains widely recognized as good is the pursuit and attainment of those goals and helping others to do the same; what is agreed upon as bad is harming other persons and hindering them from pursuing and attaining their own ends.

I would suggest, then, that making sense of serious literature requires a kind of cognitive shift from this framework—in the first instance, that it requires the recognition of and appeal to a dimension of reality that exceeds our conventional constructions, and that exceeds and sometimes radically opposes the wants and needs of persons. And as the reality of the physical world places a demand on the scientist to know it insofar as he is committed to the ideals of science, literature places a demand upon us human beings to know that deeper human reality. Therefore, this conception of literature issues forth, essentially, in a practice of reading aimed at apprehending the problems that works of literature reveal to us and the higher coherences such works evoke—a practice I would call “reading toward reality.”

Toward a Polanyian Practice of Reading

If one comes to know some human reality through the inquiry provoked by a work of literature, what does this practice of inquiry, this epistemological reading, look like? Our coming to know reality through the encounter with literature may, in the first instance, simply look like recognition—the immediate and intuitive grasp of some reality or truth that had not previously penetrated to consciousness or was not part of the reader’s ordinary consciousness. Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” may

be a paradigmatic case of this—there is nothing difficult about the work in terms of understanding what is going on, but it provokes, demands even, some recognition of the reality of death, of one's own death, a reality we know but do not generally inhabit.

Such truths may not be learned once and for all, but may rather have to be continually relearned. This is not a matter of “forgetting” as one might forget a state capital or how to do long division, but a matter of settling back into the shrunken reality of the everyday, immediate world—the institutional and personal reality of the social world. It is not that one forgets or denies the fact of death, but that one ceases to inhabit a world in which death is a *reality* and slips back into an easy half-denial—an acceptance of the fact of death as construed, as Heidegger would say, by the “they.” “One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us” (Heidegger 1962, 297).

But often we gain little knowledge from our initial experience of the work of art. This is particularly true when the work is difficult or obscure, as with modernist poetry or fiction, such as the McCarthy passage above. Here, too, inquiry must begin with some initial recognition—at least the intuition that there is something there to be known, that the effort will be worthwhile. Such recognition may also come from institutional authority or the authority of the tradition as I may not immediately be able to make any sense at all of an Eliot poem or a Beckett play and will only make the attempt to make some sense of them if I trust those who claim that it will be repaid.

Given that recognition—how would inquiry proceed? The “natural” response to a “difficult” work is interpretation or paraphrase, that is, the attempt to say what the work means, the translation of figurative meaning (broadly understood) into literal meaning. As has been extensively argued, however, it is misconceived to treat paraphrase as the end of reading literature, for this assumes that the formal and figurative features of the work (diction, syntax, meter, rhyme, metaphor, etc.) are all either decorative or part of a code to be broken in order to get at the underlying “message” of the work.

In “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag argues vehemently against this kind of “translation” on the grounds that it strips art of the distinctive depth and reality that it has, and therefore strips the world of this depth and reality as well:

To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ It is to turn the world into this world...The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have (Sontag 1961, 7).

Sontag proposes that “[w]hat we need instead of a hermeneutics is an erotics of art” (14) that would involve attention to and description of the formal features and the sensuous experience of art without trying to extract its “content,” that is, story elements

or ideas which can be stated propositionally—and therefore, by implication, grasped independently of our experience of the work.

Sontag's critique of interpretation is important as a corrective to those who would reduce a work to its meaning, yet "erotics" as she characterizes it is also, I think, inadequate as a method of fully (or as fully as possible) grasping those human realities to which works of art refer. Polanyi shows that our knowledge depends on our efforts to know—on attending to problems, dwelling in all of those facets of experience and knowledge that seem relevant to the problem, and trying to make conscious that intuited coherence which would solve the problem, or at least illuminate its character and contours. Thus, the aim of criticism is not just to allow us to experience the work of art more fully; it is a complementary endeavor to the work aimed at apprehending and articulating those problems which the work makes palpable and the realities which it evokes.

What, then, is the alternative? I propose that a practice of Polanyian reading would involve, first, attention to problems raised by the work, places where the work disrupts our ordinary way of making sense of things, through the character of the language, the use of figuration, or perhaps most foundationally by forcing us to confront realities outside our ordinary experience. Such problems will generally take the form of what seems evocative, surprising, or troubling, yet right—those aspects of plot, descriptions, or formal features of the work that depart from our expectations or wishes, or do not make immediate or conventional sense, but nonetheless seem in accord with a deeper ground of sense. In other words, Polanyian reading begins with attending to the ways in which the work points to some reality of which we have a tacit and partial, but only tacit and partial, intimation.

The next and logical step, then, is the effort to make sense, to resolve or clarify these problems—seeking the coherence of the work that makes sense of the particulars (of the work and of our perception and judgment) and the broader coherence of the human realities to which the work refers—through dwelling in the work and also in those felt relations between the work and other objects of our experience and knowledge. If there is something evocative or mysteriously, disturbingly *right* about McCarthy's description of the filibusters riding through the desert, the image of a place "whose true geology is not stone by fear"—what does that rightness suggest about issues of fundamental human concern? This entails dwelling in the work and also in those felt relations between the work and other objects of our experience and knowledge. It also entails reflection on the *grounds* of our perceptions and judgments about the work. This is to say, again, that the ultimate object of knowledge in this kind of reading is not the work but those human realities to which the work refers. I do not mean to deny that our interest in and enjoyment of literature may have other sources—sheer escape from the everyday world, aesthetic delight—but my interest is in literature as a source of knowledge.

Finally, in the method of reading I propose—reading toward reality—the crucial complement to the experience of reading is the attempt to describe—make explicit—what we perceive. This explicit propositional knowledge does not and cannot replace what we come to know through the experience of the work—it is inextricably dependent on the tacit knowledge embodied our initial response to the work, and thus inextricably dependent on the work of art itself and our experience of it. But Polanyi’s theories suggest that only through the attempt to make that experience and its implications conscious can we integrate what we intuitively glimpse in works of literature into the world as we ongoingly inhabit it, rather than letting it pass away as a transient experience. If what I have suggested about the deficient character of the everyday socially constructed world is correct, this means that the practice of reading is an ongoing labor to inhabit a world imbued not only with greater meaning and depth, but with more stringent constraints and imperatives, including (in Charles Elder’s phrase) “the imperative to consciousness,” the continuing effort to know these realities.

Central to Polanyi’s theory is the idea that there is no independent, external justification of the truths of scientific discovery and this is true of the reality we come to know through literature as well. I have implicitly appealed throughout my paper to the reader’s own experience of literature, and gestured, in my discussion of McCarthy, at the kind of reading entailed. But the validation of the theory must lie in the productivity of an ongoing practice of reading in this way and in what it allows one to find through reading particular works. I submit that the best literary criticism in fact proceeds along these lines: it enhances our sense that through literature we apprehend the deep conditions of sense of human life, and helps us make those conditions conscious so as to live and judge more often and more thoroughly in response to them.

Endnotes

¹See, for instance, James Harold (2019).

²The philosophical basis for this conception of reading and the epistemology of literature it implies derives largely from ongoing discussions with Charles Thomas Elder of his manuscript, *The Grammar of Humanity: The Sense and Sources of the Imperative to Consciousness*. Its development here is, of course, my own.

³Members of a militia who sought to take land in Mexico after the official conclusion of the Mexican-American war.

⁴I borrow this usage of “form” from Elder.

⁵“Literature, unlike fiction, is an evaluative concept and a work is recognized as a literary work partially through the recognition of the intention to present something to the reader that is humanly interesting. . . . The highly valued works of the literary canon are recognized as such because they have something to say about the ‘human condition.’” (Lamarque and Olson 1994, 276).

⁶See Ch. 2 of *The Tacit Dimension*.

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