

The Primacy Of The Explicit: On Keeping Romanticism At Bay

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ABSTRACT Key Words: wholly tacit, wholly explicit, Romanticism, Enlightenment, politics, speech
Polanyi's claim that a wholly tacit knowledge is possible is contested. Polanyi's praise for the tacit, and his critique of the ideal of total explicitness, harbors a threat of Romanticism, which, in turn, may become a threat to the value of the explicit itself, and ultimately a political threat, something that Heidegger's anti-Enlightenment philosophy and political life manifested all too dramatically. Polanyians must not lose sight of the primacy of the explicit for personal existence, something that Polanyi's work need not undermine, and indeed, that has the resources to affirm and support.

As my detractors are quick to point out, the wheels of my mind's mill grind exceedingly slow. In evidence of just how correct they are, I offer this: I have been thinking about a single sentence of Michael Polanyi's for a quarter of a century, and only now am I beginning to see something in it that I never saw before. The passage I refer to is from Polanyi's 1964 essay "The Logic of Tacit Inference," an article I first read in 1969. Often quoted as a kind of epithet of his epistemology of tacit knowing, it runs as follows: "...all knowledge is *either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge.*"¹

I know that in saying what I am about to say that I am taking a risk of being charged with suffering from a god-complex. But—perhaps in evidence that the charge is warranted—I won't let this stop me. The fact is that I am convinced that my slow grinding mind also, on occasion at least, grinds exceedingly fine. But of course, you must be the judge of this. As for me I take comfort in what Kierkegaard was fond of saying: "a bold venture is half the battle." So let me boldly venture forth and hope that in the following I do not err in trying to put too fine a point on so seemingly small a remark.

In my own self-examination, I have wondered why this passage made such a lasting impression on me. The conclusion that I have reached is not flattering. In those early days of my philosophical apprenticeship, I was under the suasion—perhaps I still am—of what J. L. Austin once called the worship of neat and tidy dichotomies. In any event, I think that I got stuck on this passage from Polanyi simply because I was expecting it to read otherwise. I thought surely it should read: "...all knowledge is either **tacit or explicit.**" The fact is, Polanyi's innovative way of putting the point took me by surprise, a bit like I was taken this past summer when Bruce Haddox showed up unexpectedly at my home in St. Augustine; I didn't expect to see him, and at first I did not see **him**; that is, it took me a second look to re-cognize him.

Well it took me more than a second look to reckon with Polanyi's disarming epistemological perspective. Even now I am continuing to discover its implications. But let me not get ahead of myself--what a strange metaphor.

The question I want to raise now is simply this: Where does the explicit figure in Polanyi's sweeping claim that "...**all** knowledge is either tacit or rooted in the tacit?"(emphasis is mine). Like all texts, of course, this one has a context. So let me refresh your memories by quoting the larger passage:

Now we see *tacit knowledge* opposed to *explicit knowledge*; but these two are not sharply divided. While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied. Hence all knowledge is *either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge*. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable.²

The focus of Polanyi's epistemological interest is found in the last sentence. As is well known, the axe that Polanyi has to grind is with what he takes to be the mistaken ideal of scientific objectivism. That ideal, as I would put it, is something like what Heidegger once called the aim of modernity to complete Plato's dream of unveiling being in its absolute presence: being as it is in itself before a detached observer. In Polanyi's terms, this is the ideal of a totally explicit knowledge, an ideal he claims is demonstrably incoherent, even "unthinkable!"

For me, the word "totally" (or sometimes "wholly") in Polanyi's critique of the epistemological ideal of "totally (wholly) explicit knowledge," figures ever as much as the word "explicit." But since "totally" just means what it means in relation to what it modifies, in this case "explicit," and since the focus of this essay is on the primacy of the explicit, I must take a moment to say what I am taking Polanyi to mean by the word "explicit."

The first thing to note is that "explicit" is a slippery term. To make something explicit often means to make it clear, to explain it in detail; but most of the time it is tied up with saying something. But there are degrees of explicitness: for example, often when we do say something, we are asked to be more explicit as though we are beating around the bush in what we do say. Here the "explicit" is contrasted with the "implicit." In this case, what is not said, for example, "You're fired!" is implicit in what is said, as in, "perhaps you need to look for work elsewhere." And sometimes "explicit" is associated with the, "offensive," the "pornographic," as in movie ratings that warn of explicit language, or sex, or violence. (Perhaps the idea of "explicit language" strikes you, as it does me, as odd.)

But my task here is not to formulate (if this means to make wholly explicit) the precise meaning of "explicit." (Does it have a (one) precise meaning?) The term "explicit" is just too dense for such an analysis. In fact, I wish that Polanyi had not made as much use of it in the way that he did as he did. My claim in this essay is that his use of the term has led to untoward consequences, most notably to a depreciation of words/language/articulation/the explicit. Well, what **uses** did Polanyi make of the term "explicit"? I emphasize "uses" because I do not find one consistent use. Sometimes he uses it as synonymous with his term "focal," just as he conflates the use of "tacit" with "subsidiary." But in general, he is consistent in associating the explicit with saying, or telling, just as he is in associating the "tacit" with what we cannot tell, or say. The Polyanian mantra is: "We know more than we can say (tell)." On Polanyi's logic, tacit knowledge is knowledge we have but cannot tell, just as explicit knowledge is knowledge that we can, and sometimes do, tell. As we might put this, Polanyi's most consistent use of "explicit knowledge" is knowledge that is mediated by articulate forms, the most important of which is language. This is exactly the way that Marjorie Grene defines "explicit knowledge" and distinguishes it from "tacit knowledge." She put it as follows:

All *explicit* knowledge, however crystallized in the formulation of words, pictures, formulae, or other articulate devices, relies on the grasp of meaning *through* its articulate forms: on the comprehension that is its tacit root. And wholly tacit knowing, as in skills, is still a grasp of significance, though without the mediation of articulate utterance.³

If anyone knew Polanyi's mind, I suppose it was Marjorie Grene. And in view of the fact that I am interested

here not only in what Polanyi said, but in how he is interpreted by his disciples, I will adopt a definition of the explicit based on her definition. I will say that for Polanyi, the articulation of words is a necessary but not a sufficient component in the constitution of **all** explicit knowledge. While the articulate and the explicit are not identical, there is no explicit knowledge apart from the mediation of words.

In this light, how do we define “totally explicit?” Our definition allows us to say that the ideal of a wholly explicit knowledge pictures articulation as both the necessary and sufficient components in knowledge: whatever can be known can be articulated, put into words, and exhaustively so. By making articulation a sufficient (as well as necessary) condition for knowledge, this ideal of a totally explicit knowledge leaves no room for the inarticulable, the tacit.

Polanyi’s argument runs something like this: it is impossible to achieve a wholly explicit knowledge, since the tacit, the inarticulable, as well as the articulated, are necessary for explicit knowledge. If the inarticulable component is necessary for explicit knowledge, then, articulation alone could not be sufficient for it. Hence, there is no wholly explicit knowledge.

At the same time, Polanyi goes in a different direction with regard to the tacit. This is a major complaint I have against his position. While he does not think that there can be a wholly explicit knowledge, he does think that we can and do have a wholly tacit knowledge, a knowledge in which articulation is not even a necessary component. It is this move, I think, that positions Polanyi, and his aftermath, for a fall into romanticism. But I will return to this point.

Staggeringly enough, the ideal of “total explicitness” is almost universally and uncritically embraced by both practicing scientists and **laymen** in post-Enlightenment modernity—if I may be permitted to use such an obvious religious allusion. But the allusion does seem appropriate, for in modernity scientists have ascended (quite literally!) to the place of the high priests—if not the gods—of knowledge and truth in both their own and in the popular imagination; meanwhile, the rest of us, the epistemological laity, merely acquiesces to their pronouncements.

For Polanyi, however, the objectivistic epistemological ideal is an illusion, a patent contradiction. And this is nowhere more clearly seen than in the actual practice of science, as Polanyi, a practicing scientist, should have known. Thanks to a unique set of circumstances however, Polanyi’s practice of science was blessedly isolated from theoretical discussions of science. When he emerged from his isolation, he could not believe what science was saying about itself. He set out to right this disastrous mistake, a mistake that threatened to destroy not only the practice of science but human culture itself.

The angle that he took was not unlike Heidegger’s or Wittgenstein’s: he focused on practice rather than theory, on doing instead of thinking, on the use of tools. When the practices of scientific research and experimentation are noticed in the way that Heidegger noticed the work of the cobbler or that Wittgenstein noticed our use of ordinary language, that is, when we “look” instead of “think,” it is clear that total transparency is impossible. Our practices are essentially embedded in unspecifiable components, not the least of which is our own embodiment. This is the tacit (inarticulable) component in practice, a component that is ineluctable. If science is first and foremost a practice, and of course it is, then the ideal of total explicitness is unthinkable.

On this point, Polanyi seems indisputably correct: “A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable.” And despite the fact that the objectivistic ideal still dominates in science, and even has considerable currency when scientific or

ordinary conversations turn theoretical, more and more intellectuals are coming to embrace Polanyi's claim as correct. Indeed, many find in Polanyi's critique of objectivism support for one or another form of anti-modernism, perhaps even support for one or another form of romanticism. His position has even been embraced by many who call themselves postmodernists. Amongst these groups, so much has Polanyi's attack of the ideal of total explicitness won the day that the tacit no longer stands in need of defense and acknowledgment. But this defeat raises a question, at least for me: for those who embrace this defeat of the ideal of total explicitness, does this victory of the tacit come at the expense of devaluing the explicit? At one point, Polanyi certainly seems to suggest just this: "If everywhere it is the inarticulate which has the last word, unspoken yet decisive, then a corresponding abridgement of the status of spoken truth is inevitable."⁴

Critical to answering this question of whether Polanyi has "abridged the status" of the explicit is what we take Polanyi to mean when he says that tacit knowledge is "opposed" to explicit knowledge. As the text we are considering clearly indicates, one thing that he doesn't mean to mean is that the tacit and the explicit are sharply divided. What do we make of this? The answer is, I believe, found in the next sentence: "While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied." As I read this, Polanyi is claiming that tacit knowledge can be sharply divided from explicit knowledge but not vice versa. Explicit knowledge requires the tacit in a way that the tacit does not require the explicit. We may call the principle at work here the epistemological primacy of the tacit. What this amounts to saying is that Polanyi thinks the ideal of a wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable, but that the idea of a wholly tacit knowledge is perfectly intelligible.

But Polanyi himself is not as settled with this as it might seem. We see this in his discussion of "ineffable knowledge" in *Personal Knowledge*.⁵ Hedging a bit in describing the ineffable domain, he says that it is "[t]he area where the tacit predominates to the extent that articulation is virtually impossible..." (87). And backing off a bit further from completely and sharply separating the tacit from the explicit, he goes on to say: "When I speak of ineffable knowledge, this should not be taken literally and not as a designation of mystic experience..." (87). But even with this qualification, he hesitates further: "Even so my attempt to speak of the ineffable may be thought to be logically meaningless..." (87). To counter the charge of meaninglessness, he says: "...strictly speaking nothing that we know can be said precisely; and so what I call 'ineffable' may simply mean something that I know and can describe even less precisely than usual, or even only very vaguely" (87-88). And then the final hedge: "To assert that I have knowledge which is ineffable is not to deny that I can speak of it, but only that I can speak of it adequately" (91). (And we cannot help but wonder here what an adequate speaking would be; would it be a wholly explicit speaking? If so, perhaps Polanyi is his own worst enemy. But that would be nothing new for most of us.) At this point, it looks as though Polanyi's notion of the ineffable is not in fact as sharply divided from the explicit as it first appeared. In fact, it almost looks as though he is arguing that there could not be a wholly tacit knowledge.

Here a crucial distinction for Polanyi must be noted: the distinction between animal and human knowing. Polanyi is fond of drawing a continuous line from the knowing of animals and infants (that is, prelinguistic human beings) to mature personal knowledge and at the same time acknowledging an enormous difference between the two. It looks to me that the idea of a wholly tacit knowledge figures for him just at the animal/human divide/continuity.

Since animals and infants do not have language, but they do have knowledge, their knowledge is wholly tacit. Polanyi says as much:

The ineffable domain of skillful knowing is continuous in its inarticulateness with the knowledge possessed by animals and infants, who, as we have seen, also possess the capacity for reorganizing their inarticulate knowledge and using it as an interpretative framework.⁶

Since animals have no language which could denote anything, we may describe all meaning of the kind that is understood by animals as existential.⁷

Does it follow from the fact that animals and infants possess a wholly tacit knowledge that mature speaking persons do also? Here I find Polanyi again very unsettled, perhaps even confused. He certainly wants to say that language, or the powers of articulation, account for the enormous gulf that exists between the kind of knowledge that persons possess (can we call this **personal** knowledge?) and the kind of knowledge that animals possess. At one point he puts it: "...if linguistic clues are excluded, men are found to be only slightly better at solving the kind of problems we set to animals."⁸

The key passage however is as follows: "Nearly all knowledge by which man surpasses the animals is acquired by the use of language."⁹ He says "nearly all" to indicate that human beings must possess a slight advantage in inarticulate powers over the animals otherwise they would not have acquired language in the first place. Otherwise our inarticulate powers are continuous with those of the animal. Can we thus conclude from this that almost all human (personal?) knowledge, that is, the knowledge that human beings as such possess is explicit or grounded in the explicit? Or to put this in a slightly different way, once a human being has acquired language is it possible for him or her to possess a wholly tacit knowledge?

In his 1967 essay, "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading," Polanyi introduces a paradigm case of human knowing, an aspect of which he takes to be wholly tacit: the traveler. This traveler visits a country never before seen, reports his first-hand experiences by letter to a friend who in turn tries to appreciate the experiences second-hand. According to Polanyi these three events constitute three stages of tacit knowing, the first of which is wholly tacit. He says:

The *first* is an intelligent understanding of sights and events, the *second* the composing of a verbal account of this experience, and the *third* the interpretation of this verbal account with a view to reproducing the experience which is reported.¹⁰

In my paradigm of the traveler we have met a purely tacit knowledge of an experience; both its subsidiary and its focal awareness were tacit. At the next stage, this focal awareness of an experience was introduced subsidiarily into a communication which was a piece of explicit knowledge, the meaning of which was tacit. *All knowledge falls into one of these two classes: it is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge.*¹¹

Now surely something is wrong here. Are we to believe that the traveler experiences the scenery in the same way as an animal or an infant? Isn't the traveler relying on his or her linguistic framework to take in the things that he or she sees, hears, smells, feels? Cats, dogs, cars, trees, ponds, mailboxes, streets, etc. are after all names. If Wittgenstein and others are right, we cannot see a cat as a cat, know that it is a cat, without knowing how to use the word "cat." Our human experience, **our world**, unlike the animal's environment, is structured through and through by words. The

experience of the traveler is a tacit experience all right, but not a purely or wholly tacit one. It is, we might say, a tacit experience that is rooted in the explicit. This is in fact just what makes it so very different from the experience of the animal.

I conclude that Polanyi is not only mistaken in thinking that the traveler's initial experience is wholly tacit, but also confused. I say this because in some places Polanyi asserts as his own point of view just the point I am now using against him. He says in no uncertain terms:

...we are aware of language in all thinking (in so far as our thinking surpasses that of the animals) and can neither have these thoughts without language, nor understand language without understanding the things to which we attend in such thoughts.¹²

I do not doubt that much of our intelligence is wholly tacit, wholly continuous with animal intelligence. But I would call this pre-personal, not personal knowledge. But this makes Polanyi's interest in developing a theory of **personal** knowledge deeply problematic. If his concern really were to provide us with an account of the kind of knowledge that persons as persons possess, then perhaps he would have been more helpful if he would have encapsulated his epistemology as follows: **All personal knowledge is either explicit or rooted in the explicit just as all personal knowledge is rooted in a pre-personal (animal?) tacit ground.**

But even this will not quite do. We cannot simply relegate the tacit to the animal in us. There is also, as I already said, a personal tacit dimension that is not coterminous with animal inarticulateness. The tacit before speech is quite different than the tacit after or between or within speech. The fact that my dog does not speak to me is not disturbing; the fact that my wife will not speak is. And this does not even touch on the necessity of reading between the lines in what she does say—a different kind of silence. There is quite literally a world of difference between animal and human silence. The tacit dimension in the personal context is a tacit that is rooted inextricably in the explicit.

In any case, what I am suggesting here is that Polanyi would have been wiser had he adopted the principle of the epistemological primacy of the explicit rather than the tacit. Adopting such a principle need not, indeed must not, entail abandoning Polanyi's profound insight that in speaking we always say more than we know and know more than we say. With this corrective to the craving for total explicitness, Polanyi could have, and in my opinion should have, embraced the epistemological primacy of the explicit. He should have done this, if for no other reason than to be consistent with his interest in developing a theory of **personal**, as opposed to animal, knowledge. But there are other, more pressing reasons.

Before I detail these other reasons, let me say a word about the way that I am using the term "primacy." As I see it, the explicit (what is mediated by words) is **primary** in the sense of being more important, more central to, more definitive of, personal knowledge than the tacit. Without the explicit there would still be knowledge (animal/infant knowledge), but no **personal** knowledge, that is, no knowledge that only persons as persons have. And this is so even though the tacit is clearly and necessarily the primordial ground of the explicit in personal knowledge and even though much of what we as persons know is common to what animals know and not therefore strictly speaking uniquely personal.

But let us return to these other reasons I just mentioned for adopting the principle of the epistemological primacy of the explicit over the tacit. To see these, we must turn to the issue of romanticism. I have been keeping this matter at bay too long now.

“Romanticism” has many meanings. What I mean by it in this context is something like what Whitehead meant in his famous chapter in *Science and the Modern World* entitled “The Romantic Reaction.” The movement was a reaction to the eighteenth century, to the Enlightenment, to its scientific naturalism, its mechanism, its reductionism. I am in sympathy with this romantic reaction to the Enlightenment in this respect: I think the romantics rightly object to the strain in the Enlightenment that threatens to eclipse the human reality, call this the Enlightenment’s technological bent, its impulse to improve the human reality by transforming it into something other than itself, into something mechanical.

The irony of the Enlightenment tendency toward mechanization is not missed on the astute romanticist. Romantics are certainly aware that the leveling reductionism of the Enlightenment that threatens the human reality itself finds its impetus in a passionate moral humanism. This Enlightenment humanism was born and developed in the wake of a rational skepticism that freed human beings from the authority of the gods. In this eclipse of the gods, human beings assumed the role of making the world a better place; and with god out of the way, the sky was the limit. This optimistic humanism generated a dream of better living through chemistry, a dream of bringing good things to life through technology. But, as the romanticist passionately protests, the dream turned into a nightmare, the moral passion turned into a moral inversion. It produced a darkness more frightening than did the eclipse of the gods, it produced the terrifying possibility of the eclipse of the human itself.

While it may not be obvious where to put Polanyi in this debate, it does seem clear that many of those attracted to his work fall somewhere in the camp of Enlightenment critics, if not into the camp of romanticism itself. I say this after looking over a stack of back issues of *Tradition and Discovery* that I keep in my office. With few exceptions, the assumption of Polanyians is that what Polanyi means by “post-critical” is identical with “post-Enlightenment.” (The one exception to this that I did find was Andy Sanders’ piece in which he asserts: “...Polanyi remains firmly rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment.”¹³ But even here, the concern is exclusively with epistemological issues and not with the broader humanistic concerns of the Enlightenment—concerns that are most clearly manifest in its political ideals.

I found that the tendency among Polanyi scholars is not only to identify post-critical with post-Enlightenment, something I myself have often done. I also have noticed another assumed identity: more often than not, the term “Enlightenment” is used interchangeably with the term “Modernity.” But let me quickly add, many Polanyians stop short of identifying the term “post-Enlightenment” with the term “post-modern.” Indeed, this latter movement has come under sharp criticism by Polanyians, including myself. Nevertheless, most Polanyians do see modernity as “the problem,” and Polanyi’s post-critical perspective as its solution.

Dale Cannon, whose work I admire very much, wrote an essay in *Tradition and Discovery* that goes right to this point. The essay was written in honor of our mutual teacher Bill Poteat, someone who showed me the dark side of the Enlightenment/Modernity, “the shadow of it” as I once called it an article of my own.¹⁴ It is the title of Dale’s article that caught my eye: “Haven’t You Noticed That Modernity Is Bankrupt?”¹⁵ Whether we have noticed it or not, Dale is sure that modernity is indeed bankrupt, a conclusion that has lead him in the direction of what he calls, after

Parker Palmer, “spiritual formation,” and toward an interest in what we might call a forerunner of the protest of romanticism, the monastic movement.¹⁶

Suffice it to say that I cannot imagine a single Polanyian disagreeing with the claim that modernity is indeed bankrupt. Indeed, once Harry Prosch went to great lengths to disassociate himself completely from “modernism”: “...I think I have clearly exhibited how far my views are from anything that could be called ‘modernism.’ No ‘modernist’ would have me, I’m sure.”¹⁷ I am sure that any good Polanyian would be proud to say: “No modernist would have me.”

Some of us have tended to locate the essence of Modern\Enlightenment consciousness in the philosophical position of Descartes. Many of us have seen in his rationalism the perfect instance of just that epistemological ideal of total explicitness that Polanyi is concerned to discredit.

Descartes has indeed become so much the demonic embodiment of Modernity, that adopting his positive evaluation of clarity and distinctness has become the sure sign of our “modernism.” Ben Ladner, for example, in his essay in honor of Poteat, and in an effort to demonstrate that he is not stuck in the assumptions of Modernity, says that the goal of understanding, which is inseparable from its pre-reflective, ambiguous, somatic ground, is **not clarity!**¹⁸ And Araminta Johnston jumps all over Charles Taylor for associating clear articulation and explicitness as the marks of rationality.¹⁹

Is Polanyi’s so-called “victory of the tacit” a victory over clarity, over explicitness, over rationality? Is it a victory over the Enlightenment and over Modernism? Well we certainly cannot doubt that the Enlightenment’s drive for mastery and control has had its devastating consequences. It has, we might say, brought out the beast, the monstrous, in us. But my question is this: are we Polanyians, who stand more clearly within the romantic protest against the scientific naturalism of the Enlightenment than within the Enlightenment itself, in need of keeping our incipient romanticism at bay?

I worry about this because I see more and more just why my good friend Jim Steins sees so much in common in the work of Polanyi and Heidegger.²⁰ I think that he, and others like Maxine Greene,²¹ are right to see and to note these parallels. I worry about this not just because Heidegger is, despite his protest notwithstanding, a romantic, but because in his life we see the hard existential dangers of his wholesale romantic, anti-modernist rejection of the Enlightenment.

Heidegger is convinced that the Enlightenment and hence the modern age is utterly and completely bankrupt. For him, and I think decidedly unlike Polanyi himself, this bankruptcy included the humanistic political ideals of the Enlightenment, its ideas of individual rights and freedom. For Heidegger, freedom was always conceived through the eyes of Nietzsche, as a will to power and domination. This is really, for him, the source of productionist metaphysics, technological nihilism, and ultimately the dehumanism of the modern age. Rationality, clarity and distinctness, the drive for explicitness, and so forth, were for him simply modes of nihilistic calculation, signs of the will to power. All of this made Heidegger sick, or, as he put it, homesick, homesick for a more authentic, more human existence.

But, as Michael Zimmerman has convincingly shown in his book *Heidegger’s Confrontation With Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art*, Heidegger’s anti-Modernism, his anti-Enlightenment sentiments, fueled his reactionary politics. Drawn to soil, to the earth, to blood, to family, to the hearth, to the nation-as-one-family, etc. he fell for National

Socialism. How did this happen?

The long and the short of it is that Heidegger failed to see that the Enlightenment was not completely bankrupt. He failed to see that the humanistic and political ideals of freedom and reason, constitutionally protected individual rights, and even a good measure of autonomy, are essential for a human civil society. But most importantly, he failed to see that the element of a civil society that is most fundamental, that is absolutely indispensable is the freedom of speech. Call this the political expression of the epistemological principle of the primacy of the explicit. Freedom to speak is a bedrock human freedom; it is a freedom that implicitly respects a plurality of voices, that values public debate and dissent, that grants respect for rational adjudication between opposing ideas, that prizes clarity and precision, that values argument. These are Enlightenment values; they are public values; without them, a civil human society is impossible.

Heidegger could not however bring himself to see the political ideals of the Enlightenment as anything more than further manifestations of the struggle for domination and control. For him all political debates, all honest rational discussion, are simply disguised calculations, deceptive techniques for domination and manipulation. Since words, for Heidegger, are finally no better than techniques of deception and domination, he longed for a new beginning, a new more immediate existence. I see this as a romantic longing for the mysterious, the transcendent. He wanted to return to the ground of our being, to an original experience of immediacy, to a level before words, to a level prior to the subject/object distinction that is implicit in the logical structure of language. Can we say his romantic urge was a longing for the wholly tacit? In this new existence, we will stop controlling things, stop trying to master them; we will simply let things be; we will relate to things as the authentic artist does, especially the lyric poet. In our new more authentic being, we will become lyric poets of being.

Well can you imagine a bunch of lyric poets in Congress? This would leave Mr. Jefferson laughing. Certainly there is a place in the coffee house or parlor for poetry readings, for ruminations, for meditations, for getting in touch with our feelings; indeed, such poetry may be indispensable for the health of the soul. But imagine trying to conduct the affairs of state (or science, or even life for that matter) in the language of lyric poetry? What seems to be needed for public affairs is argument, reason, precision, logic, persuasion, clarity, as well as passion and commitment. A civil society cannot run on the basis of aesthetics; it is essentially ethical through and through. As such, it requires declaration, and must remain open to objection and dissent. Declaring oneself before another requires the explicit; it is perhaps its essence.

The romantic dream that aesthetic immediacy can save us from the threat of the Enlightenment's drive for control, for total explicitness, for mastery, sets us up, as it did Heidegger, for political disaster. When reason, clarity, explicitness, are no longer granted their voice in public debate, when our words are devalued as techniques of control and dominance, the only alternative, when it comes to making policy, when it comes to deciding on the social, economic, and political arrangements, and so forth, for a society will be a recourse to brute (animal?) power, that is, to force and violence. It is such a recourse, as I see it, that is the root of modern nihilism.

If recourse to brute power is all that we have, then the only thing to do is to take our place behind the power structure that enforces the values we think should be promoted. In this respect, National Socialism fit the bill for Heidegger, for if nothing else this reactionary political movement was clearly a rejection of the ideals of the Enlightenment.

What Heidegger did not see, and what romanticism in general does not see, is the danger of not seeing that our words are our humanness; they are what sets us apart from the animals, they are the basis of our culture, of our personal knowledge, of our human life together. But they can only be vested with their rights within a certain kind of world. It was this world that the Enlightenment envisioned, at least partially. It was because of this vision that the Enlightenment placed such a high value on the explicit. Without such a high value on the explicit, force and violence will replace rationality; without a high evaluation of our words, the basis of civil agreement will be gone. In the end, it is words that hold us together, not blood, not earth, not family; it is words that establish laws, covenants, marriages, declarations of independence, constitutions, but most importantly our conversations together. Without these conversations, we truly are not human.

Let me leave you with two remarks, one from my own hand, the other from the hand of a more noted romantic. I say first to Polanyians who are tempted to romanticism, and most emphatically I say it to myself: let us be more equivocal in our critiques of modernity, and in particular, more careful in our attempts to ground the explicit in the tacit, lest we end in political disaster; and let us be more mindful of what we long for. Finally, I quote Frederick Hölderlin, the romantic poet who was Heidegger's mentor. I quote him, however, in the hope that what Hölderlin says can be used to quite different ends than those of Heidegger; I quote it as an inspiration to all of us to take a second look at the Enlightenment: "Where danger is, also grows the saving power."

Endnotes

¹ Michael Polanyi, "The Logic of Tacit Inference," *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (University of Chicago Press, 1969, p.144.

² "The Logic of Tacit Inference," *KB*, p. 144.

³ *KB*, p. xv.

⁴ *PK*, p.71.

⁵ *PK*, pp.87ff. Succeeding quotations from this discussion in the paragraph are simply noted in parentheses.

⁶ *PK*, p.90.

⁷ *PK*, p. 90.

⁸ *PK*, p.70.

⁹ *PK*, p.95.

¹⁰ “Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading,” *KB*, p. 186.

¹¹ “Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading,” *KB*, p.195.

¹²*PK*, p. 101.

¹³Andy F. Sanders, “Tacit Knowing--Between Modernism and Postmodernism: A Problem of Coherence,” *TAD*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, p. 15.

¹⁴Ronald L. Hall, “In the Shadow of the Enlightenment, The Plight of the Humanities in an Age of Scientific Objectivism,” *TAD*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, pp. 19-25.

¹⁵Dale Cannon, “Haven’t You Noticed That Modernity is Bankrupt? Ruminations On the Teaching Career of William H. Poteat,” *TAD*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, p. 20.

¹⁶*TAD*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, p. 24.

¹⁷ Harry Prosch, “Those Missing ‘Objects’,” *TAD*, Vol XVII, Nos. 1&2, p. 20.

¹⁸Ben Ladner, “Who Said What,” *TAD*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, p. 9.

¹⁹Araminta Stone Johnson, “Theory, Rationality and Relativism,” *TAD*, Vol. XX, No. 3, p. 18.

²⁰Jim Stines, “Chaos Theory, William Poteat's Polanyian Explorations and Indwelling,” *TAD*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, p 17.

²¹Maxine Greene, “The Problematic of the Humanities: The Clues and Cues of Michael Polanyi,” *TAD*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, pp. 11ff.