

Following the Beam of Light:

A Polanyian Reading of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*

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*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 erosion, inevitable dispossession.*

Lindsay Atnip 2020, 49-50

Being something of a newcomer to Polanyi studies, I have not read many of the essays in *Tradition & Discovery* discussing Polanyian readings of literature. However, an issue I am familiar with and has been especially useful is Volume 45, number 1 (2019), with essays by Jean Bacharova, Stan Scott, Martin Turkis, John Fennell, and Lindsay Atnip's review of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Criticism*. As suggested by my epigraph, I have also been helped by Atnip's "From Meaning to Reality: Toward a Polanyian Cognitive Theory of Literature" (2020). And Jon Fennell's discussion of C. S. Lewis on good reading, provided me with my title of following a beam of light. Thank you, Jon.

*Keywords:* John Steinbeck, Michael Polanyi, *Grapes of Wrath*, focal and subsidiary awareness, indwelling, moral inversion, light, dust, metaphor, tenor, voice

**ABSTRACT**

*In my essay, I use Michael Polanyi's ideas of indwelling, moral inversion, tacit knowing, and his two kinds of awareness, focal and subsidiary, as tools for interpreting John Steinbeck's classic novel *Grapes of Wrath*. I also explore how metaphor, especially Steinbeck's tractor — referred to as "the monster" — connects to Polanyi's minotaur and illustrates one form of moral inversion Steinbeck, though he did not use the phrase, saw during his lifetime. Also important to my interpretation is "heteroglossia," the multiple*

*narrative voices Steinbeck used to tell the story of the Joads and the migrant workers, as these voices reveal, what Polanyi has called, "two kinds of awareness," the focal and subsidiary.*

When I read many of Michael Polanyi's writings, I like to imagine that he and John Steinbeck knew each other and would meet in some café to discuss ideas and current events. "You know, John," Polanyi would say,

Man has the power to establish real patterns in nature, the reality of which is manifested by the fact that their future implications extend indefinitely beyond the experience which they were originally known to control," (PK 37)

and while he would speak of indwelling, moral inversion, and focal and subsidiary awareness; Steinbeck would respond with a fictional story about tenant farmers working the land, faceless "monsters" that devastated the land, and set a figure (Tom Joad) against a background of subsidiaries — the Dust Bowl, the banking industry, corporations, and profiteers. In his 1939 novel *Grapes of Wrath* (GW), Steinbeck "predicted" the future implications of corporate capitalism that he could not fully know — outcomes we are observing/experiencing today — but ones he could imagine from what he had been observing/experiencing in America, most especially California, his home state.

Only by becoming intimately involved in the life of Tom Joad, his family, and the migrants with whom they interact did I become aware of and come to understand the power of the subsidiaries they must contend.

[T]he characteristic feature of subsidiary awareness is to have a function, the function of bearing on something at the focus of our attention . . . . Next we may observe that the focal image, into which the two subsidiary pictures are fused, *brings out their joint meaning*; and thirdly, that this fusion *brings about a quality* not present in the appearance of the subsidiaries. We may recognize then these three features as parts of a process of knowing a focal point object by attending subsidiarily to the clues that bear on it. We meet here the structure of *tacit knowing*, with characteristic *functional, semantic and phenomenal* aspects (KB 212; Polanyi's italics).

Also at work in the novel's structure are different kinds of voices. One is of an omniscient narrator, with an almost Biblical-sounding voice:

- The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle that gave a little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back toward darkness, and the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn . . . . When the night came again it was black night, for the stars could not pierce the dust to get
- down . . . . In the middle of the night the wind passed on and left the land quiet (GW 5).

But we hear other voices, such as those attached to the "minor," but important, characters seen at the various roadside stops and in the migrant camps:

In the restaurant the truck driver paid his bill and put two nickels' change in a slot machine. The whirling cylinder gave him no score. "They fix 'em so you can't win nothing," he said to the waitress (GW 10);

The voices of Tom Joad, his family, and Jim Casy are of "major" characters:

When the truck had gone, loaded with implements . . . with every movable thing that might be sold, Tom hung around the place. He mooned into the barn shed, into the empty stalls, and he walked into the implement lean-to and kicked the refuse that was left. He visited places he remembered . . . And then his pilgrimage was over, and he went to sit on the doorstep (GW 122).

Tom's "pilgrimage being over" is more than his quashing childhood and young adult memories; it is the echoing of the "property is him" referenced below, as well as signaling the end of his indwelling and the beginning of "goin' someplace."

"Goin' someplace" is heard in the back and forth narration between these three voices giving credence, I believe, to Polyani's discussion of "Randomness and Significant Pattern":

When the eye divides the field of vision into 'figure' and 'background,' it prepares to see the figure retain its identity while moving forward, backward or sideways against a background which, by contrast, is essentially at rest and retains its background character, even while undergoing an indefinite variety of changes. No feature of the background may be linked in an orderly manner to the figure" (PK 38).

By focusing on Tom, not only are we subsidiarily aware of the forces the migrants have to contend — have to battle — just to survive, we see how a "a solid object bombarded by random elements of the medium forming its background will be itself set into random motion" (PK, 38-39). The random motion of goin' someplace, but not knowing exactly where — except west — is also a motif spoken by a number of characters: the distant, omniscient narrator; the gas station attendant referred to as the fat man; Tom; Jim Casy, the ex-preacher traveling with the Joads; and Big Bill the trucker.

Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66 — the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map . . . 66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land . . ." (GW 160).

"Don't know what the country's comin' to," the fat man continued. "Fifty-sixty cars a folks go by ever' day, folks all movin' west With kids an' househol' stuff. Where they goin'? What they gonna' do?"

"Doin' the same as us," said Tom. "Goin' someplace to live. Tryin' to get along. That's all" (GW 171).

Soon after Tom says, "Doin' the same as us," Casy tells the fat man, "Always on the way. Always goin' and goin'" (GW 173). And, by Chapter Fifteen, we hear Big Bill tell Mae, the waitress: "You ought to be out on 66. Cars from all over the country. All headin' west . . . God Almighty, the road is full a them families goin' west. Never seen so many" (GW 215).

Each voice functions like the stereoscopic images Polanyi described in "The Structure of Consciousness": "The objects appear then distributed in depth, more rounded and real, harder and more tangible" (KB 211). The different narrative voices and the fusion Polanyi refers to enable us, the readers, to see — to feel — the unfolding of moral inversion. They work conjointly to help us discover a "vision of reality" that is far beyond our comprehension" (PK, p. 64). Although Steinbeck never wrote the words "moral inversion," Polanyi's analysis of moral inversion can be used as a tool for interpreting Steinbeck's explanation for why *some people* kicked other people off the land where they had been living for generations and, also, denied them their tools, extensions of themselves that have allowed them to work and be one with the land. When Tom, recently released from prison, reaches the Joad place, he hears directly from Muley Graves, a tenant farmer his family has known for years, about the "Shawnee Lan' and Cattle Company": "It ain't nobody. It's a company" (p. 65). That specific company is alluded to in Chapter Five when the omniscient narrator describes the owners of the land coming onto the land:

The tenant system won't work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families . . . And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves (GW p. 44).

These "owners" operate as bank messengers, telling the tenant farmers they must get off the land, because the land is no longer profitable.

"We're sorry," they say. 'It's not us; it's the bank. A bank isn't like a man. Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't like a man either. That's the monster . . . The bank is something more than men, I tell you" (p. 45).

One owner man says to the the farmers, "the monster was stronger than they were," and another admits, "But the monster's sick. Something's happened to the monster" (p.44). The monster, while made by men, is something men cannot control. What Steinbeck calls the monster, Polanyi calls the "minotaur": "This is how moral inversion is completed: man masked as a beast turns into a Minotaur" (PK 235).

The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was part of the monster, a robot in the seat . . . the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver's hands, into his brain and muscle" (GW 48).

Moral inversion, imagined as the Minotaur, has produced a bizarre and lethal form of indwelling: while somehow getting into the man's gloved hands, it has prevented him from seeing, smelling, and feeling. The man sitting on the iron seat drives the tractor that is "raping

methodically, raping without passion" (GW 49). Moral inversion is also shown in the lack of passion for what the iron-seated man does:

He [the tractor driver] loved the land no more than the bank loved the land. He could admire the tractor — its machined surfaces, its surge of power, the roar of its detonating cylinders; but it was not his tractor (GW 48).

The tractor driver does not touch the seed he plants, nor does he lust for its growth. And unlike the tenant farmer who sifts the dirt through his hands and "wets his fingers up to sense the wind" (GW 4), he sits in the iron seat "proud of the power he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control" (GW 49). And the land borne "under iron gradually died, for it for it was not loved or hated, it had not prayers or curses" (GW 49). Not dwelling in the land — not dwelling in the tools you use or work you do — is the "grim and inflexible resolve of objectivism," the science Polanyi saw in the totalitarian state: "a desperate refusal of all knowledge that is not absolutely impersonal . . . a mechanical conception of man which was bound to deny man's capacity for independent thought" (PK 64, 214).

The farmers who dwell in the land understand the land; they know more than they can articulate — the Polanyi Paradox — because the property, as little as it is, is part of them. They have walked the land, handled it, smelled it, have felt sad when it's been too dry and fine when there's been enough rain. "That property is him, and some way he's bigger because he owns it" (GW 50). The knowledge they have acquired is implicit; they have learned through experience and have internalized their knowledge unconsciously. "[I]t is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning" (TD 18).

But woe to those who own property they cannot see or "get his fingers in." As the Biblical, omniscient voice warns:

He can't do what he wants, he can't think what he wants.  
The property is the man, stronger than he is. And he is small,  
not big. Only his possessions are big — and he's the servant  
of his property. That is so, too (GW 51).

The corporate property owners and bankers' knowledge comes through spreadsheets, through commodity values, through their business strategy: "Make the land show profit or we'll close you up" (GW 52). Their cold calculations (their objectivism) show how they lack intellectual passion. They cannot say, "I built it with my hands," as the tenant farmers can, nor can they say they grew, harvested, and made the very food they are eating. "Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread" (GW 49). What they can and *do* do, however, is "eat without relish," toss the crust of branded pie into the field (something the tenant farmers cannot afford to do), and blame others for the injustices cropping up around them: "It's not me. There's nothing I can do" (GW 51).

The *don't blame me; I'm just carrying out orders* exemplifies moral inversion on an immediate level or local level (the tractor driver) that leaves the victims helpless. It is what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil," a kind of moral inversion practiced by subordinates.

The tenant farmers ask questions that evoke circuitous answers: who is in charge, what can we do, where can we go, “where does it stop, who can we shoot” (GW 52) — questions easily pondered by those of us who have called customer service (or a pharmacy), only to be rerouted from one Siri voice to another. The tractor driver’s words are what we, the reader, hear, and are, therefore, focal; yet, at the same time, they echo the subsidiary: the working class and working poor are at the mercy of banks and faceless corporations that have now gone global. How different, I wonder, is the tractor from Amazon or Artificial Intelligence? While they are human-made inventions and have the capability of “doing good,” they, when driven by algorithms and those without feeling or sense-understanding, cause destruction, leaving men like Tom’s father (or those of us placed on hold) to say, “Seems like the man ain’t got no say no more” (GW 546).

As such, the tractor serves as a metaphor for moral inversion: it symbolizes the destruction of the land, the forced migration of a people, the breakdown of community, the rise of corporate farming, industrial mechanization, the loss of humanity, and coldheartedness.

The iron guard bit into the house-corner, crumbled the wall, and wrenched the little house from its foundation so that it fell sideways, crushed like a bug. And the driver was goggled and a rubber mask covered his nose and mouth. . . . and the ground vibrated with its thunder. The tenant man stared after it . . . His wife was beside him, and the quiet children behind. And all of them stared after the tractor (GW 53).

In his essay “Indwelling and Breaking Out: Language and Literature in Post-Critical Perspective,” Scott (2019, 17) argues “that literary metaphor is a manifestation of the tacit dimension of language.” The tractor is literally a vehicle, as well as being the vehicle of metaphor: the “concrete word-image” that “works as a clue to an indeterminate field of referents (the tenor), where the tacit dimension of meaning is lodged.” Scott continues by saying, “the indirect structure of meaning in metaphor becomes a part of its method of teaching us how to read” and illustrates this by pointing to how Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, and James Baldwin used the word “light” in specific works. “The vehicle in metaphor carries the reader in a dynamic *from-to* movement, *from* a point of known reference *to* a referent that is unknown or less understandable by ordinary means.” Steinbeck’s tractor moves people *from* their land to an unknown place (California), *from* their knowing how to work the land *to* their not understanding how to pick peaches, *from* their believing in California’s Eden-like offerings *to* their discovery of reality: life, there, will be just as brutal and grueling as it was before. For the reader, the tractor moves us *from* an ignorance about tenant farming, the harsh reality of weather patterns and the Dust Bowl, the tenant farmers’ plight *to* a greater awareness about migration, the human condition, contending with forces out of our control, and just what it means to survive. Dust, a cloud Tom Joad drags behind him, also serves as a metaphor: obscuring people’s vision, harming crops, and bringing about death to a way of life — *from* ashes to ashes *to* dust to dust. Through metaphor, discovery happens “as a result of activating the same key elements, imagination and intuition — in three stages: 1) *indwelling* . . . , 2) *breaking out* of an accepted framework . . . , and 3) the moment of *discovery* itself” (Scott 2019, 17).

Scott, not only describes metaphor as showing a *from-to* movement, but a movement that is also circular. This is the three-part structure of making meaning from metaphor.

When the reader engages in a search for meaning, the mind takes a pathway . . . from the vehicle to the tenor, and in circular fashion, back again to the vehicle, for further clarification of where it is leading us to (Scott 2019, 17).

Using the words *reflect back*, *making sense*, and *grasping*, Atnip (2020, 41) also refers to the circular movement found when reading literature:

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 -- grasping the dramatic problem . . . With respect to image and description making sense means grasping what is being depicted or described — understanding its referent, meaning and significance (2020, 41).

*In Grapes of Wrath*, this circular movement is shown through the turtle Tom Joad picks up as he heads for home. *From* the time Tom picks it up, hoping to give it to his two youngest siblings *to* when he sets it down, we see an animal, like the migrants on Highway 66, “crawling slowly along through the dust” (GW 24). But there is more to the turtle than an animal who, also like the migrants, carries its house on its back. Turtles, both land and sea, excel at navigation and, with their internal compass, will return whence they had come. Returning back to one’s original home is later seen at one of the roadside campgrounds: “The ragged man said slowly, “Me — I’m comin’ back. I been there . . . I’m goin’ back to starve. I ruther starve all over at oncet” (GW 257).

The ragged man, as brief as his appearance is, plays an important role — the role of rogue (ragman, ragamuffin) found in M. M. Bakhtin’s essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” (1981, 159).

Essential to these three figures [the rogue, clown, and fool] is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege — the right to be “other” in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available . . . they see the underside and the falseness of every situation. Therefore, they can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask. The rogue still has some ties that bind him to real life (1981, 159).

When the ragged man first tries to speak, he sounds more like the clown or fool: his laughter gives way to “a high whinnying giggle,” one that “got out of control and turned into coughing. His eyes were red and watering when he finally controlled the spasms” (GW 257). But he is the Voice of Reality, and after “telling it like it is”, he:

turned and walked quickly away into the darkness. The dark swallowed him, but his dragging footsteps could be heard a long time after he had

gone . . . his head hanging down and his hands in the black coat pockets”  
(GW 260-261).

With his head practically obscured and his hands tucked inside his clothes, he is the human form of the turtle crawling back to the territory he knows. And he is the personification of the role of “questing” or “striving imagination.” As Jon Fennell points out in his essay “Author and Reader: Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading in C.S. Lewis’s ‘Good Reading’” (2020, 41), the ragged man informs the Joads (and anyone who will listen):

“The more fellas he [the contractor] he can get, an’ hungrier, less he’s gonna pay. An’ he’ll get a fella with kids if he can, ‘cause — hell, I says I wasn’t gonna fret ya.” The circle of faces looked coldly at him. The eyes tested his words” (GW 257).

Fennell (2019, 47) quotes Polanyi, stating: “the striving imagination has the power to implement its aim by the subsidiary practice of ingenious rules of which the subject remains focally ignorant” (Polanyi 1969, 200). Not only are the tenant farmers “educated,” so is the reader. By attending to the focal point — the voice of the ragged man and “the circle of faces that had turned rigid,” the reader [the good reader] grows to understand what the migrants are up against — do we keep heading west and hope for work, or do we turn around to that place we once knew as home? But, unlike the turtle, they cannot turn back because there is no “back”; the tractor/the monster/the minotaur has demolished their home. Their “damned if we do, damned if we don’t” anguish has become the reader’s anguish. The ragged man is the lens into the bigger picture — the subsidiaries, which in this instance, is false advertising and marketeers.

The two layers of awareness, focal and subsidiary, and the varying narrative voices (Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*) also reveal what Robert DeMott, when citing Louis Owens (1992, xiii), describes as being the four layers of Steinbeck’s novel:

On one level it is the story of a family’s struggle for survival in the Promised Land . . . . On another level it is the story of a people’s struggle, the migrants’. On a third level it is the story of a nation, America. On still another level, through . . . the allusions to Christ and those to the Israelites and Exodus, it becomes the story of mankind’s quest for profound comprehension of his commitment to his fellow man and to the earth he inhabits.

The voice of Jim Casy — a fallen prophet, so to speak — is the focal point of the reader’s coming to terms with what it means to have faith, and, at the same time, question one’s own faith. Casy is always quick to point out that he is no longer a preacher; yet, he still prays: “I ain’t a preacher no more, but all the time I find I’m prayin’, not even thinkin’ what I’m doing.” (GW 69). Prayin’ is his tool, his extension of self that indwells in something bigger than himself: a tool that enables him to see through and along an event similar to the beam of light C.S. Lewis uses to describe “good reading,” which Fennell references in his essay cited above: “we may look at the beam (an objectivist perspective) or we may *look along it*” (Lewis 1970, 212-215, quoted by

Fennell, 2019, 43). When we *look along* the beam, we “remain inside the beam.” After listening to Muley Graves’s account of what has happened to his land, why he refuses to leave his land, even though he hasn’t been able to talk to anyone, and thinking that he may be “touched,” Casy says, “You’re lonely — but you ain’t touched” (GW 70). Hearing the story, like looking at a beam of light, is not enough for Casy. He must see beyond the immediate image: “I gotta see them folks that’s gone out on the road. I got a feelin’ I got to see them” (GW 71). His *seeing* becomes Tom’s vision:

“Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one— an’ then— . . . Then I’ll be aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where — wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there . . . An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in houses they build — why, I’ll be there. See? God, I’m talkin’ like Casy. Comes of thinkin’ about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes (GW 572).

Tom’s fully *making sense* of the world happens when Casy is murdered — the moment he “sees along the beam of light.” His taking up Casy’s torch requires him to leave his family, which points to the subsidiary of the disintegrating family, resulting from forced migration. And Casy’s torch is what Tom has to hold *and* bear: “Puts a weight on ya,” he tells his mother after the Joad men had spent a day looking for work. “Goin’ out lookin’ for somepin you know you ain’t goin’ find,” and it *refers back* to his telling Casy when they first arrive at what had been the Joad place, “Somepin’s wrong . . . I can’t put my finger on her. I got an itch that somepin’s wronger’n hell” (GW 479, 57). Tom’s taking up the torch also illuminates *Grapes of Wrath* becoming, as cited above, “the story of mankind’s quest for profound comprehension of his commitment to his fellow man and to the earth he inhabits.” It is Tom’s “confronting the Minotaur,” to use D. M. Yeager phrase; it is the emerging of his *moral self*: the giving up of oneself to the greater good — to that which is bigger than oneself; the giving of oneself to the cross one has carried.

This giving of one’s self is shown most powerfully at the end of the novel when Rose of Sharon, after giving birth to a still born in what appears to be Noah’s flood, nurses a starving man who is a complete stranger. She is the Good Samaritan, the hope for humanity.

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. “You got to,” she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. “There!” she said. “There.” Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously (GW 561).

When writing about his process of writing *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck wrote:

I went over the whole book in my head — fixed on the last scene, huge and symbolic, toward which the whole story moves. And that was a good thing, for it was a reunderstanding of the dignity of the effort and the mightyness of the theme. I feel very small and inadequate and incapable but I grew to love the story which is so much stronger and purer and braver than I am (GW xxxiii).

Steinbeck's *personal knowledge* about the migrant workers' plight grew out of his witnessing the working conditions at the Visalia migrant camp and his working and living alongside impoverished migrant families in the San Joaquin valley. His experience moved him *from* writing a series of journalistic exposés about the "California's industrialized agricultural system . . . which produced flagrant violations of the migrants' civil and human rights" *to* a work of art that seeps into the reader's skin and inhabits her/his/their (singular) being (GW xxiii). As DeMott (1992, xxxv) points out in his Introduction, Steinbeck's experience at Visalia "propelled his metamorphosis from right-minded competency to inspired vision," a vision that had him following the beam of light and created in him an "internal wounding [that] opened the floodgates of his affection" and provided the novel with its "haunting spiritual urgency, and rooted it in the deepest wellsprings of democratic fellow-feeling" (1992, xxxv).

How many cups of espresso Steinbeck and Polanyi might have consumed over the course of their café conversations is for the objectivist to decide; but for the readers who allow works of literature to take hold of their beings, dwell inside them, and become a part of their aesthetic experience that will "help [them] to make contact with with reality" (Bocharova 2019, 5), the number of cups goes beyond measure.

#### Endnote

In his essay "Forms of and of the Chronotope in the Novel," found in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), M.M. Bakhtin coined the term chronotope, likening it to Einstein's relativity theory of space and time, where time is the fourth dimension of space. For Bakhtin, time and space worked as a metaphor, showing the connectivity between the temporal and spatial relationships in literature.

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