

[*Readers familiar with the basic arguments of The Tacit Dimension/Personal Knowledge and/or Meaning may if necessary skim or skip sections I (p. 2-5) and/or II (p. 6-10), respectively.*]

I begin from the premise that through reading and reflecting on literature we gain a certain kind of knowledge, and since knowledge is knowledge of some reality, we come to know some reality—not merely an empirical reality (say, what it was like to live in 19th century Russia, or the differences in the ways men and women think about things) but something of the conditions of judging and making sense of human experience more generally (including our own), conditions which are both material and ideal.¹ The intent of this chapter is to more fully characterize that reality and how it is that we come to know it through the encounter with literature. In this paper I want to suggest how the work of Michael Polanyi provides the means to theorize how we can come to know human realities through works of literature, and a basis for a practice of “reading toward reality,” reading more discerningly so as to engage with and internalize the reality with which they put us in contact.

The philosophical consideration of art’s relation to reality is, obviously, an ancient one. It begins with Plato’s theory of mimesis, and the idea that art imitates or represents reality has been, in its variants, a consistent foundation of the idea that art has something to teach us.

For Plato, art is at best useless for philosophy—“a copy of a copy,” an inferior imitation of objects in the world which themselves are copies of the forms or concepts of those object—and too often worse than useless, stirring up emotions that interfere with good judgment. However, the second major theorist of mimesis, Aristotle, arrives instead at a positive account of art’s relationship to reality. Aristotle characterizes tragic drama as the imitation of an action conforming to laws of probability and necessity—laws which are not restricted to the fictional world of the tragedy but which are the same laws that govern the audience’s world, the “real world.” Contrasting poetry with history, he claims that the poet writes not of what happened but of “the kind of thing that *would* happen” and this in fact makes poetry more philosophical than history—conducive, that is, to the pursuit of wisdom, of knowledge of a reality relevant to our determination of our own lives.

Yet Aristotle’s characterization leaves open two objections which must be answered in a persuasive account of how we come to *know* something through literature and especially literary fiction. The problem is that we ourselves have to judge whether or not the work seems “true” or not, plausible or not, and if we have a preexisting standard according to which we judge, how can we be said to have learned anything from the work? Moreover, even if (as I will argue) we come to know that standard of judgment more adequately and consciously through the encounter with and reflection on the work, why should we believe it is *objective* and not just a product of our particular culture and personal biases?

These objections arise, I propose, from a positivist conception of reality in which the universe is composed of the knowing subject and the known external empirical world. Stated crudely, what is real is what is there for all to literally see—or otherwise to observe or measure—and everything else is subjective (individual or collective) prejudice.

To give a plausible account of literature might educate us to reality, then, we need a different—and more adequate—conception of *reality* than any yet articulated or implied. I submit that both objections can be answered if one conceives of reality and how we come to know it as suggested by the work of Michael Polanyi: that, as I will explicate below, reality is that which conditions and responds to

¹ The basic conceptions of literature and reading foundational to this paper derive in large part from discussions with Charles Thomas Elder and from his unpublished manuscript, tentatively titled *The Imperative to Consciousness: Notes on the Grammar of Humanity*. These include: that literature educates us to a reality that transcends our common social world—i.e., to a knowledge, both tacit and explicit, of the normative conditions of human life; that these conditions are not and cannot be directly represented; and that we arrive, at least potentially, at the knowledge of these conditions through the activity of reading and the effort by which we try to understand (or grasp the form of) what we read. The development of these ideas here, in relation to theories of mimesis and to Polanyi, and their application in my readings of Maclean and McCarthy, are my own.

our perception and inquiry into problems, that our knowledge of reality has an irreducibly tacit and “personal” dimension, that our tacit knowledge of reality indicates the direction in which reality, or the resolution of a problem, lies, and that an increasing grasp of reality is accompanied by an increasing sense of coherence—and that human realities such as love, virtue, etc. should be accepted as *realities* because they are conditions for making sense of our lives and our experience.

I will give a brief account of Polanyi’s argument and then articulate a Polanyian conception of literary mimesis, and a practice of reading aimed at knowing the realities works of literature “imitate.”

I. Polanyi’s “Post-Critical” Theory of Knowledge, Reality, and Discovery

Polanyi’s philosophical work grew out of a dissatisfaction with logical positivism—that is, the idea that we can only claim to know either purely formal relations (those of logic, mathematics, or semantics) or empirically verifiable facts—and felt the other contemporary philosophical critiques and alternatives to positivism, such as ordinary language philosophy, to be inadequate alternatives. In other words, his work is precisely the attempt to articulate the foundations for the kind of knowledge I wish to argue we acquire through literature—or, as he put it, to develop a “post-critical philosophy” that, after the skepticism of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, could conceive of those matters of utmost importance to human life once again as matters of *knowledge*.²

The foundation of Polanyi’s characterization of knowledge, reality, and discovery is the idea of “personal knowledge”—that all knowledge, including knowledge that we think of as “objective” (our apprehension of the sensible world, scientific discovery), depends on the knower’s active—if not conscious—integration of the particulars of experience into coherent wholes which make sense of those particulars.

Knowledge must be “personal” because it has an irreducibly *tacit* dimension: “we know more than we can say.” Polanyi takes as exemplary the way in which we recognize a face without being able to specify those features by which we know it—a central insight of Gestalt psychology. While Gestalt psychology assumes that this integration of particulars into a recognizable whole happens spontaneously, however, Polanyi asserts that it is an *active* process which is, moreover, the foundation of all our knowledge:

Gestalt psychology has demonstrated that we may know a physiognomy by integrating our awareness of its particulars without being able to identify these particulars...[It] has assumed that perception of a physiognomy takes place through the spontaneous equilibration of its particulars impressed on the retina or on the brain. **I am looking at Gestalt, on the contrary, as the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge. This shaping or integrating I hold to be the great and indispensable tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true.** (TD 6)³

So Polanyi contends that tacit knowing is involved in *all* knowing, and an essential characteristic of this *tacit knowledge* as he conceives it is that it is not a passive knowledge of a given reality but something acquired through *activity*, through our attempts to understand or to accomplish something.

What is involved in this “integration of particulars,” and what are its implications?

Tacit knowledge, Polanyi shows, involves a relation between two terms—the object of our focal attention (the face we recognize, the thing we think of as “knowing”), and the particulars that compose the object of our attention or knowledge. Polanyi speaks of the “from-to” structure of this relationship: we attend *from* the particulars *to* the focal object of our awareness. Even in the case of the face, where the particulars “from which” we attend are in the same physical location as the face or expression we recognize, “the fact remains that the two are distinct, since we may know a physiognomy without being

² For a succinct account of Polanyi’s object of a “post-critical philosophy” see Mark T. Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi*, Ch. 3. Richard Gelwick’s *The Way of Discovery* also provides a summary of Polanyi’s stance against “objectivism.”

³ I will refer to Polanyi’s books by abbreviation: *The Tacit Dimension* (TD), *Meaning* (M), and *Personal Knowledge* (PK).

able to specify its particulars” (TD 12). We are not consciously aware of the particulars—the shape of the nose, the thickness of the eyebrows—but only tacitly aware of them as they bear upon our identification of the whole. And this “bearing upon the whole” is what makes them meaningful—the nose or the brow have no meaning in themselves, just as individual letters have no meaning in themselves; it is because they jointly constitute a whole—a whole that is an object of interest—that they become significant, and that they can be (part of) an object of knowledge.

To integrate the particulars with respect to a whole which they constitute is to find them *meaningful*. Thus knowledge is a matter of meaningfulness, and meaning is a matter of unity or coherence—of making sense of particulars in terms of a comprehensive whole. Moreover, they are meaningful only *in* their tacit integration—because their meaning is a product of this integration, they lose their meaning (at least, *this* meaning) when we make them the object of explicit focus. (Polanyi uses the example of how a word loses its meaning when we repeat it over and over again, focusing on its sound—or the appearance of the letters—rather than attending *from* the word’s physical attributes to its sense in context [TD 18]). Thus it is not just contingent that we know more than we can say, but necessary—whatever of our knowledge we can make explicit (and there is much that we can), the explicit knowledge does not exhaust what we know tacitly.

An essential correlate of this conception of tacit knowledge is that the whole which is to be known is not given, but is a function of interest or need. It is not written into nature that these features just *are* constitutive of a face, that this face is their joint meaning; rather, it is our interest in recognizing the face or reading the expression that constitutes them as such.⁴ Thus knowledge is a product of *intention* and *attention*.

Knowledge therefore entails integration of particulars into a coherent whole that responds to some interest or need—to *do* something or to *understand* something, or to be able to *proceed with inquiry*.

Polanyi argues that the integration of particulars into a meaningful whole in effect means making the particulars a part of ourselves, of *dwelling in* or *interiorizing* them. This is fairly evident with respect to how we know the physical world through our body, especially in skilled activity—when we ride a bike, the balance of the bike and the feel of the tires on the pavement becomes part of the bodily, tacit knowledge from which we attend to our purpose of navigating the path and getting where we’re going—but Polanyi argues that *all* knowledge has this structure. The historian dwells in the evidence in attending to her question, in working on her theory; the evidence becomes an extension of herself—and conversely, when considering a new piece of evidence, a new phenomenon, the theory takes the proximal, tacit position:⁵

To rely on a theory for understanding nature is to interiorize it. For we are attending from the theory to things seen in its light, and are aware of the theory, while thus using it, in terms of the spectacle that it serves to explain. This is why...theory can be learned only by practicing its application: its true knowledge lies in our ability to use it. (TD 17)

...if we now regard the integration of particulars as an interiorization [identification with a belief or theory or something outside of ourselves through which we read], it takes on a more positive character. It now becomes a means of making certain things function as the proximal terms of tacit knowing, so that instead of observing them in themselves, we may be aware of them in their bearing on the comprehensive entity which they constitute. It brings home to us that it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning. (TD 18)

⁴ Even in the case of the poem—we are so accustomed to recognizing a poem as a “whole” that it seems “natural,” but it is something that we have constructed as such, at however basic a level.

⁵ It seems as if “proximal” and “focal” terms are fluid. There is a certain way in which the proximal and distal terms can switch places, when it comes to beliefs or theories. Empirical particulars—e.g. historical events or natural phenomena—might be proximal terms from which one attends to a theory, or the theory might be the tacit background from which one attends to the particulars.

In other words, we know a theory or a moral truth not in directly reflecting on and explicitly stating it, but in attending tacitly *from* it to those things we make sense of by means of the theory or belief.

This means, crucially, that the world as we inhabit it is a product of our learned capacities, both our skills and our knowledge of the way things are. As Polanyi articulates it:

Because our body is involved in the perception of objects, it participates thereby in our knowing of all other things outside. Moreover, we keep expanding our body into the work, by assimilating to it sets of particulars which we integrate into reasonable entities. Thus do we form, intellectually and practically, an interpreted universe populated by entities, the particulars of which we have interiorized for the sake of comprehending their meaning in the shape of coherent entities. (TD 29)

Or, more briefly, “we interiorize bits of the universe, and thus populate it with comprehensive entities” (TD 35)—we “take in” pieces of our experience and knowledge and integrate them by “looking out” and seeing them as parts of integrated wholes.

It has become a commonplace that we read the world through a set of inherited beliefs, values, and so on into which we are socialized, and Polanyi’s account of how we “populate the universe” with “coherent entities” which are our tacit integration of particulars is consistent with this view. But Polanyi’s point is not that reality is therefore a subjective construction, to be opposed either to an objective “way things are” obscured by that construction, or to a meaningless chaos. Rather, he shows that the way we know things—what it *means* to know something—is to make sense of it in this way, to find it as a constituent of a higher order.

Thus even scientific knowledge, knowledge of the material or biological world, is the product of our reading of the world, our ability to dwell in the particulars of that world and integrate them into “comprehensive entities”—molecules, forces (e.g. of gravity or momentum), ecological systems—that allow us to make sense of them and to further inquire into the world they compose. These entities, which I would characterize as *structures of sense*, are not given; they are the product and condition of inquiry (and therefore also of our interest and attention).

Our knowledge of the human world is analogous. If we think of trying to understand a particular historical event—say, the American Civil War—this brings us in view of the kind of knowledge I want to say we acquire through reading literature—knowledge of a whole that comprehends uncountable particulars of human life and human experience, individual and collective—or, proximally, “particular wholes” that comprehend overlapping subsets of these particulars. This is not finally a matter of acquiring a set of abstract laws or generalizations about the way people are or the way they ought to be, although if we attempt to make explicit what we have learned, we would express some of it in such propositions.⁶ But the knowledge we have acquired is also a matter of greater coherence, the way in which formerly disparate, unintegrated or even repressed particulars have acquired a new and more comprehensive meaning.

If knowledge consists of the (largely tacit) integration of particulars into a comprehensive whole that constitutes the meaning of the particulars, then learning or discovery—an increase in knowledge (or skill)—entails a new, more comprehensive integration; the creation of a more comprehensive structure of sense.

There is a kind of mystery to this process which is essentially the problem of the *Meno* and will bear upon our understanding of how literature can be educative: how can we come to know something that is not a matter (only) of acquiring new information? Polanyi shows how the tacit component of knowledge explains this apparent paradox, and he unfolds it by discussing how the perception of a *problem* guides inquiry culminating, potentially, in discovery.

⁶ Such as Gary Saul Morson’s “One Hundred Sixty-Three Tolstoyan Conclusions” e.g. “True life takes place when we are doing nothing especially dramatic. The more the drama, the worse the life” (*Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*, 223).

It is a commonplace that all research must start from a problem...But how can one see a problem, any problem, let alone a good and original problem? For to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars. (TD 21)

That is, to see a problem entails not only recognizing something yet unintegrated into some existing structure of sense, but something of which one has some idea—some intuition—of a new structure of sense to which it might belong. The scientist (or historian) may collect infinite amounts of data, and can test a hypothesis using the existing data,⁷ but there is no rule by which she can formulate the hypothesis to begin with—it must come out of her sense of a whole—a *reality*—of which the existing particulars are a part and to which they are clues.

The objection will be raised: why is this *reality*? Why are these meanings, these structures of sense, *objective*? Is Polanyi's criterion of the increasing sense of coherence merely *coherentist*; is there anything to prevent us thinking that the "comprehensive entities" into which we integrate the particulars of our experience are just part of a closed system with no necessary reference to an external reality?

The essential response to this objection, and the essence of Polanyi's conception of reality, is that reality—something external to our beliefs—must be presupposed in order for the activity of inquiry to have sense. In essence, reality is defined *as* the necessary presupposition of inquiry.

This emerges in Polanyi's discussion of discovery. Noting that scientists recognize the truth—and greatness—of an important scientific discovery in part by the fruitfulness of that discovery, Polanyi argues that this implies that we must have some "tacit foreknowledge of yet undiscovered things" because of course we cannot yet know the further discoveries that will be enabled by the current advance.

...as we can know a problem, and feel sure that it is pointing to something hidden behind it, we can be aware also of the hidden implications of a scientific discovery...We feel sure of this, because *in contemplating the discovery we are looking at it not only in itself but, more significantly, as a clue to a reality of which it is a manifestation. The pursuit of discovery is conducted from the start in these terms; all the time we are guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing; and the discovery which terminates and satisfies this pursuit is still sustained by the same vision. It claims to have made contact with reality: a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations.* (TD 24, emphasis mine)

So reality is, on the one hand, that which justifies inquiry—the whole endeavor of science makes sense only if one supposes that there is a unified reality there to be known—and is at the same time that which makes sense of the experience of discovery, and our experience generally. (Polanyi's conception is continuous with that implied by Freud's "reality principle"—reality is that which is independent of what we wish it to be—or as Philip K. Dick puts it, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."⁸)

The criterion of increasing coherence cannot be further grounded, and so there is a certain circularity in Polanyi's argument, as he admits. But this is essentially the assumption of science—that there is a unified order to the natural world, and that it is possible to attain a better grasp of this unity through theories (constructions) more adequate to it.

One may question whether this is the case in the human world, and of course if it is, it's not the same kind of order, the same kind of unity—nor do the foundational constructs according to which human beings make sense of their experience have the same kind of natural, empirical referent as the concepts of science do.

⁷ Although Polanyi argues that even this involves an unformalizable element of judgment—to be able to tell what counts as "data," to distinguish an aberration from significant variation, and so on.

⁸ "How To Build A Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later"

To back up for a moment—let us consider in more detail what it means to acquire greater knowledge of “human reality,” which we might characterize as becoming more objective.

We are faced with problems—determining what we ought to do, how to judge, how to make sense—in fact, all of these are ultimately problems of sense. In our everyday lives we have the resources of our language and our institutions—conventional social reality as we inhabit it—to respond to these problems of sense-making. But often an event or experience will challenge the adequacy of these given frameworks, and in the process of determining how to respond to the challenge, the framework itself—the interiorized network of beliefs through which we make sense of things, which as discussed above constitutes the world as we find it—is transformed, made more adequate (e.g. our experience within an intimate relationship causes us to revise our inherited notions about the “rules” of relationships). Some events—divorce, the death of a child, war or political upheaval—might be so catastrophic that no alteration of our current framework of sense can accommodate them, and so those frameworks are at least temporarily shattered and we find ourselves in a fragmented world in need of a radically new principle of integration, which we may or may not find. If we do find a new way of making sense, this would be analogous to Kuhn’s paradigm shift in science, or a religious conversion (and the paradigm shift may indeed take the form of a religious conversion).

The example of conversion points to the obvious potential objection to the criterion of coherence—that the coherence may be false, that the framework of sense may be distorting. (I do not argue that the religious sense of coherence *is* necessarily false, but many of course would.) Clearly the criterion only works if accompanied by an insistence on comprehensiveness, on the recognition of disturbing elements and the effort to confront them. But that additional criterion is not really external to the standard of coherence—or, more commonsensically, to the standard of truth.

In the end, Polanyi essentially appeals to our experience—it is simply the case that in order to make sense of our lives we must understand what happens to us as *contact with reality*, and therefore as long as the new framework encompasses and integrates new knowledge and experience, it must be conceived as being more adequate to reality than the previous—allowing for greater knowledge of reality. “We ought,” as he puts it, “to adopt the kind of general views about the nature of things that and the nature of knowledge that will not prevent our belief in the reality of those coherences that we do, in fact, see” (M 67).

Polanyi distinguishes reality from “mere appearance” by the fact that the former “has a ‘life’ of its own,” while the latter is “made up of the coincidental effects of many heterogeneous causes and subject entirely to the independent future manifestations of these separate causes” (M 66). For the past century and a half or more, theorists have argued that our ways of making sense and particularly our normative beliefs are “mere appearances,” surface manifestations of underlying causes—material conditions, structures of power, unconscious wishes, and so on. Yet our norms and ideals continue to exert their force upon us. As Polanyi writes, “whenever we utter moral condemnation or approval, or else seek guidance in a moral dilemma, we always refer to moral standards assumed to be generally valid” (M 27), and positivists (and Marxians, Freudians and so on) do these things no less than other people (though perhaps with reference to different standards).

This capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future I attribute to the fact that the thing observed is an aspect of a reality, possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect of it. To trust that a thing we know is real is, in this sense, to feel that it has the independence and power for manifesting itself in yet unthought of ways in the future. (TD 32-33)

Moreover, when we disagree about these standards we *argue* about them, appealing to some common ground that can presumably encompass and resolve the disagreement. This argument may appear *ad hominem* but in fact points to the deep contradiction in the denial of normative standards—we cannot make sense of our experience without them.

II. Polanyi's Theory of Art, Critically Appropriated: From Meaning to Reality

From the Polanyian perspective we can now formulate a general response to the questions left unanswered by earlier theories of mimesis: how can literature be revealing without giving us new information, and how can the human reality it shows us be understood as objective, neither merely a reflection of our personal and idiosyncratic beliefs or of the ideology of a particular society or culture? To the first: literature must somehow allow us to achieve new tacit integrations of the objects of our knowledge and experience into increasingly coherent wholes. To the second: the assumption that these structures of sense have reference to some reality, and that it is possible to come to know this reality better, is a condition for making sense of experience; there is a necessary circularity in this argument, but it is not qualitatively different than the circularity implicit in scientific inquiry.

But this remains to be developed.

Polanyi in fact articulated a theory of art, and it makes sense to begin with there, though ultimately I will want to move beyond his own emphasis on how art creates *meaning* to articulate how our encounter with it can give rise to *knowledge*.

Polanyi's theory of art rests on a general theory of symbols, which he puts forth in his lectures on "Meaning," edited into a book of the same name by Harry Prosch. In the lectures, Polanyi develops his general anti-positivistic ontology and epistemology to more explicitly articulate an account of those "coherences that are thought by us to be artificial, not natural"—including those of art, religion, and morality—which allows us to believe in the reality they 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.

While (as discussed above) Polanyi argues that all knowledge, even perception, depends on active tacit integration, he recognizes that the integrations involved in perception, skillful action, and scientific theorizing seem subject to external constraints—the constraints of "nature"—while those involved in moral judgment, aesthetic experience and interpretation, and religious belief seem to be "in our heads," individual or collective. Gravity, for instance, we think of existing independently from what we personally or collectively believe, while we suspect that "justice" does not, that it is an epiphenomenon, the expression of a will to power or the product of evolutionary pressures.

The essential problem as Polanyi seems to see it is to characterize the reality of the referent of *symbols*, broadly understood. He begins his analysis with the distinction between *indicators* and *symbols*, and his understanding of symbols and the reality to which they refer will form the basis for his understanding of art—and my own, with some elaboration and modification.

In general, our apprehension of meaning entails a tacit integration of various subsidiaries [S] to a focal meaning [F], which Polanyi schematizes as follows:

$$S \longrightarrow F$$

With an indicator, the subsidiaries (the appearance of a word on the page or the word's sound, our knowledge of the English language, etc.) are not of intrinsic interest but only conditions for our apprehension of the meaning; we "look through" them to the meaning (so that, for instance, a bilingual reader may not even remember the language in which she read something but only the information acquired). Polanyi represents this relationship as:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} -ii & +ii & \\ S & \longrightarrow & F \end{array}$$

indicating that our intrinsic interest [ii] is in the focal meaning rather than the subsidiaries. This is, I think, because the subsidiaries are not integral to the meaning itself but only to conveying it—in the case of the indicator, the message is at least analytically separable from the medium.

In a symbol, however, we do attend to the medium—the piece of cloth that is the flag, the hunk of stone that is the tombstone—we don't just “see through” it; the medium *is* in fact the object of our focus. But the focal object—Polanyi uses the example of the flag of one's own country—“is of interest to us only because of its symbolic connection with the subsidiary clues through which it becomes a focal object. What bears upon the flag, as a word bears upon its meaning, is the integration of our whole existence as lived in our country” (M 72). That is, we only attend to the flag because this attention effects an integration of our experience and gives it a new (or renewed) meaning.

In the surrender of ourselves to the flag, the medal, the tombstone—to whatever turns our focal object into a symbol for our country, for a great deed, or for a loved person—we accomplish the integration of those diffuse parts of ourselves that are related to these persons or things.... It is a wholistic imaginative achievement of meaning.... (73)

So when we look at our country's flag—in an attitude of openness or “surrender”—then “the nation's existence, our diffuse and boundless memories of it and of our life in it, become embodied in the flag” (M 72)—it “reflects back upon its subsidiaries, fusing our diffuse memories” (M 73)—creating the new coherence of, for instance, *America* and myself as an *American*. It would be reasonable to say that America would lack a certain reality without the flag to symbolize it—the flag, therefore, functions both to constitute the reality of America and to allow one to come to know that reality.⁹

Thus in the case of a symbol, Polanyi argues, the location of our interest shifts: the focal object (the starred-and-striped piece of cloth) is only of interest because, and insofar as, it effects this integration of the various subsidiaries. He schematizes this first as:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} + \textit{ii} & & - \textit{ii} \\ S & \longrightarrow & F \end{array}$$

--and then, because of the transformative character of this integration, the way in which it reflects back on our understanding of ourselves, our experience, and the world we inhabit:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} + \textit{ii} & & - \textit{ii} \\ S & \curvearrowright & F \end{array}$$

One might object that the ultimate focal object when we attend to a flag is not the piece of cloth but its “referent”—the United States—just as the focal object when we read the words “the United States” in expository prose is not the letters on the page but *their* referent. That is, one might object that Polanyi wrongly applies his subsidiary-focal schema, that the flag is analogous to the word, and both refer to the country—and that the latter therefore is what we “see” when we look at the flag, in which case the focal object *is* of interest after all: not the piece of cloth but that image of “America” which incorporates our knowledge, beliefs, and experiences.

But Polanyi's analysis suggests an important distinction in the character of the referent in the two cases. Polanyi discusses this difference in terms of the beholder's involvement in the meaning of the symbol (and later, when he gets to art, in terms of the artist's involvement in the new coherence she apprehends and expresses in her work): the symbol's meaning—its referent—is bound up with and depends upon the subjectivity of the beholder (or creator), whereas the referent of an indicator is more or

⁹ The idea of “surrender” may set off alarms. If the symbol of the flag functions in service of chauvinism, couldn't one say that the coherence it creates is not reality but fantasy? This is a perennial danger with human creations, and as mentioned above, coherence can only be an adequate criterion of reality when paired with comprehensiveness.

To the extent that the flag is a symbol and not just a piece of propaganda, it can arguably bear and even evoke the discrepancy between America as it is and America as an ideal—which is the “reality” it brings into being and represents.

less independent of the beholder—even if the beholder’s active integration is necessary to *know* that referent.

Polanyi does not, however, develop his characterization of the *reality* to which the artistic symbol refers, and why the apprehension of this reality seems necessarily to involve attention to an object of little or no intrinsic interest—as he characterizes it. In fact it seems rare to me that a symbol has no intrinsic interest (certainly this isn’t the case with that central symbol of Christianity, the cross or crucifix). To the extent that the symbol is not utterly arbitrary, it has the potential for interest due to its internal connections to what it symbolizes. The flag and tombstone lie at the extreme end of the spectrum in this regard, being almost arbitrary, and even they will often be designed or decorated in a way that conveys something about the country or person they represent or memorialize.

I would say that the more essential distinguishing feature of the symbol is, rather, that its meaning—the referent, the ultimate object of interest—is not exhaustively *determined* (indicated) by the features of the sign. And, correlate to this, that the importance of our individual (“personal”) involvement is not that the reality we apprehend is subjective, or a reality of our subjectivity, but rather that it is a reality that cannot be fully known explicitly or conveyed propositionally.

One might formulate this by saying that the referent of an indicator is a *fact*, while the referent of a symbol is a *reality*. I use “fact” in the general analytic philosophical sense—“what is the case,” a state of affairs to which propositions may or may not conform. To return to the example of America and the flag: America is, in John Searle’s sense, an institutional or social fact, dependent upon common (mostly tacit) “agreement” (to be distinguished from “brute facts” such as physical objects and laws which exist independently of human recognition), its existence and characteristics constituted by the country’s own political institutions as well as those of the rest of the world which recognizes the United States as an entity, “a federal republic composed of 50 states, the federal district of Washington, D.C., five major self-governing territories, and various possessions.”¹⁰

The fact of America is determinate, even if certain details may be contested (for instance, whether it encompasses certain territories). But we might also speak of the *reality* of America, which encompasses but exceeds its institutional factual existence as well as any and all facts *about* the country; it is, rather, the background condition of these facts (just as one might think of the *reality of a person*, as the basis upon which one can make claims about that person but which cannot be finally and exhaustively articulated).

The fact of America is something that we can know and refer to explicitly, even if, like all knowledge, it rests on tacit knowledge. The reality of America, on the other hand, is something that we know largely tacitly—we need a symbol, or symbols, to be able to know it, to evoke and focus the tacit component of that knowledge—the “personal” component, as Polanyi would have it, that which cannot be detached from our subjective, active, embodied knowing, which is not only a condition for knowledge of that reality but an indispensable part of that knowledge. My knowledge of the fact of America does not depend on my experience of America—or of other countries; my knowledge of the reality of America does; indeed the reality of America is partly constituted by the experience of those who inhabit it. The flag will mean something different to someone who has studied the Constitution, served in the armed forces or public office, lived abroad for a long time. (This is not by any means intended to imply that our experience is infallible.)

In general, I would argue that the referent of a symbol has an inextricably tacit component—that what the flag or the cross stands for cannot be made fully explicit—and that knowledge of that referent and even its existence depends upon certain experience, education, cultivated sensibility, and effort of attention. The physical reality of America—the land—exists independently of what anyone knows or thinks. The social or institutional reality of America depends on human recognition, but its institutionalization gives it an objectivity independent of any particular individual’s knowledge or recognition. (My ignorance of the US-Canadian border will not stop the border patrol from trying to prevent my crossing it without a passport.) But the America that one apprehends through attention to the

¹⁰ “The United States of America,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States, retrieved 8/1/2016.

flag is dependent on one's knowledge and sensibilities—and not only on our familiarity with the country (our experience and memories, as Polanyi would have it) but on our grasp of its history and its ideals. I might add (in this case) to the list of subsidiaries the American ideals of liberty and equality and say that the coherence one achieves—ideally—is a normative reality in which we are implicated.

Symbols allow for the integration of diffuse aspects of our memory and experience, knowledge and belief, value and attachment. While Polanyi characterizes this characteristic of symbols as “self-giving” (as opposed to “self-centered”) I think this is misleading, making it sound as if the function of a symbol is essentially therapeutic (whether or not that's what Polanyi meant)—that is, the implication is that what is integrated in our attention to a symbol is *ourselves*. But I would propose that the integration of our memory and experience is not (merely) an integration of ourselves but the of things external to ourselves as well—of that which our diverse and fragmented bits of consciousness are intimations. The symbol allows for the tacit apprehension of connections—of the relation, for instance, between our life as lived in our country and the ideals of that country. It is *this* which accounts for the symbol's power to “move” us or “carry us away,” a quality to which Polanyi frequently recurs. The idea of being *carried away* or *moved* implies the apprehension of something of existential significance—something to be feared or desired, preserved or striven for, something threatened or threatening. We are moved by what matters to us, by what we believe (rightly or wrongly) to be important.

The integration enabled by a symbol therefore creates—or makes us aware of—a previously or otherwise ungrasped coherence, which changes the significance of the various fragments that are integrated in that coherence—altering or deepening the meaning and implications of a belief or experience, or showing as meaningful or significant what had previously seemed unconnected or random. Such coherence is not merely an artificial imposition on what is “really” chaos; it is the kind of reality that human realities—those realities which make up the distinctively human world—have. That is, such coherences are conditions for making judgments or decisions at all, on the assumption that there is something at stake in acting or thinking one way versus another. These cannot be proved or finally established but only validated through one's ongoing efforts to make sense of and integrate one's experience, perceptions, and beliefs.

Polanyi finally discusses poetic metaphors, giving an example from Shakespeare's *Richard II*: “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / can wash the balm off from an anointed king.” We tend to think in a metaphor we ‘read through’ the non-literal elements (the sea washing off the balm)—the “vehicle” as it is sometimes described—to grasp a literal meaning or “tenor,” e.g. “through all abuse or denial I will always be a king.” But Polanyi points out that the referent is something beyond both tenor and vehicle, that through their resonance with each other—and with our associations to each—they allow us to grasp a further coherence that encompasses both. The interaction of tenor and vehicle allow us to understand something about the significance of what is transpiring is not be adequately expressed in the prose content.

Thus the work of art is not an indicator that refers to an object that stands apart from it or from the reader or hearer—as might be implied by Plato's theory of mimesis (the meaning of a painting is the real-world object whose appearance it imitates) or one of the all-too-common interpretations which reduce a poem to its prose content (the meaning of the poem is its translation into literal speech). Rather, the meaning of the work of art is the novel integration it occasions, the coherence it allows us to apprehend or achieve (partly or largely tacitly) through its suggestion of previously unthought-of (though perhaps not unfelt) connections.

The meaning of a poem is not its prose translation but the coherence that emerges in our reading of it, a coherence of the ideas and imagery and our own knowledge, experience and associations. The meaning of a work of literary fiction is not reducible to its story or a moral that might be extracted from it, but is rather the integration of plot, character, language, historical situation relative to our own historical situation, and again our own knowledge and experience, into a compelling narrative of some particular human endeavor or experience which at the same time resonates broadly and penetratingly.

But I want now to distinguish between the meaning of a work and the *reality* we come to know through that work. If the meaning is the coherence or integration, I would propose that the reality we come to know, tacitly and explicitly, is not the coherence or integration itself but the conditions of that

coherence or integration, which are the conditions of sense. I will argue that the coherence suggested by narrative and poetic art is the coherence made possible by referencing different and deeper conditions of sense than those of our everyday world, conditions which can be made partially but not fully conscious and explicit.

III. Extending Polanyi: A Polanyian Theory of Mimesis

By Polanyi's account, an advance in our knowledge of reality results from perceiving problems and following those problems out. Earlier I discussed how events in our lives could pose problems for us that are problems of *sense*, and lead to a restructuring of our ways of making sense. Literature can be and has been conceived as posing such problems vicariously, and surely this is one of the ways in which it can be educative. 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 the plausibility of her being destroyed by the costs of her affair with Vronsky and the failure of that affair to conform to her fantasies of it. But I propose 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. Literature, I will argue, 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.¹¹

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 currently popular to say, is “messy,” full of loose ends and unintegrated fragments and lacking neat resolution. But if human beings are teleological creatures, always oriented consciously and unconsciously toward ends both immediate and more distant, then we are continually trying to make narrative sense of our own life—the conditions of making sense of our lives are narratological.

Our lives have a minimal narrative coherence provided by the social constructions of the cultures in which we live, but—as I will develop further on—the social narratives we inherit are always inadequate to our experience, typified and 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, moreover, 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*

¹¹ I acknowledge that this coherence is not necessarily “higher,” that the sense of coherence we have in the experience of reading is often or largely the coherence of fantasy and may be a false coherence; it must be tested through further reflection.

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 connections. The reality we come to know through the work is the condition of that sense of rightness—the condition of these connections.

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.

Consider the following passage, from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, describing the passage of the filibusters¹² 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' trappings 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. (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 of horseriding and Mexico and weather and so on, 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—it 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. (I put *meaning* in quotation marks because, as I will argue below, the whole to which the work refers is not best understood as its meaning in the sense that traditional interpretive criticism aims at explicating the meaning of a work.)

With respect to this passage, one might 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 that 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

¹² Members of a militia who sought to take land in Mexico after the official conclusion of the Mexican-American war.

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.¹³ 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 when we judge Ahab a tragic hero or an embodiment of evil—and the possibility of 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.

As this implies, the form itself refers not just to the objects of description within the story but to broader human realities: everything to which we refer when we make sense of a story and 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 character of the constraints on human agency in modernity.

The work is a work of *literature* and not just entertainment in part because it seems to be about something important, because it has “something to say about the ‘human condition.’”¹⁴ “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 work itself in its entirety as an aspect of some reality or realities—a clue to a further whole which comprehends it. That reality is not what is explicitly described—it is, rather, the indeterminate entity 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,” following Polanyi, because that “entity” 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

¹³ I borrow this usage of “form” from Thomas Elder.

¹⁴ Lamarque and Olsen: “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.’” (*Truth, Fiction and Literature*, 276)

axes, which work together: the 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.

In the McCarthy passage, we inhabit the poetic language and look toward the form, and 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. The language and figuration evoke 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.

IV. A Different Kind of Sense—Emergence and Social Constructivism

I have suggested something about the character of the reality, or realities, to which literature educates us—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. But 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. I will develop this using Polanyi’s conception of “emergence.”

Polanyi’s argument against reductionism—the Laplacean ideal of explaining everything according to the motion of atoms—rests on the observation that our knowledge of particulars depends on our construal of those particulars *as* parts of a comprehensive and “higher level” entity which gives them their meaning, so that, as he puts it, “the structure of comprehension” corresponds to “the structure of the comprehensive entity which it its object” (TD 33-34). That is, whatever it is that we are trying to understand—for instance, a baseball game—we understand it as an entity, so it only has its meaning and therefore its *reality* as an entity, not just as an aggregate of all the “lower level” things of which it is composed. Questions about why a baseball player tried to steal a base and whether this was a wise decision will not be answered with reference to physical forces, nor even simply with reference to the rules of the game, but only with reference to strategy and standards of what makes a good play within the game of baseball. The laws of physics and the rules of baseball describe *limiting* but not *determinant* conditions for how the game plays out and how we make sense of and judge a given play. Thus, while

the principles controlling a comprehensive entity would be found to rely on their operation on laws governing the particulars of the entity in themselves...the laws governing the particulars in

themselves would never account for the organizing principles of a higher entity which they form.
(TD 34)

The need to integrate the particulars into a higher-level entity in order to make sense in effect creates, or reflects, a new *level* of reality. (The ambiguity about whether this is a matter of creation or discovery should not be troubling. In the Polanyian model, all knowledge is “created” in the sense that the individual must actively, if not consciously, integrate the particulars of knowledge and experience into a meaningful entity; however, this is not a free and arbitrary creation but constrained by the standards of sense and by the world which the individual is trying to understand or manipulate.)

Polanyi refers to this as the *emergence* of a higher level of reality from a lower, which he claims has both an ontological and an epistemological meaning. For example, ontologically (and evolutionarily), the interaction of molecules governed by the laws of chemistry gives rise at some point to living organisms, which have their own governing principles irreducible to those laws; epistemologically, while the action of molecules can be understood by appeal to the laws of chemistry (and this is the object of the discipline of chemistry), the study and understanding of living beings as coherent entities of their own—that is, biology—must avail itself of principles beyond those of chemistry.¹⁵ In effect, Polanyi claims,

[t]he relation of a comprehensive entity to its particulars...[is] the relation between two levels of reality, the higher one controlling the marginal conditions left indeterminate by the principles governing the lower one. (TD 55)

In this case, then, biology seeks to supply those principles governing life which are “left indeterminate” by the laws of chemistry.

Likewise, Polanyi argues, at some point from animal life emerges a human form of life which is not fully explicable with reference to instinctual behavior and the demands of self- and species preservation; understanding human behavior requires an appeal to normative standards, to human beings’ “moral sense”:

...both this moral sense and our respect for it presuppose an obedience to commands accepted in defiance of the immemorial scheme of self-preservation which had dominated the evolutionary process up to this point. (TD 52)

Explaining our moral sense according to the principles of evolutionary biology is, of course, highly popular at the moment, and it is beyond my scope here to further critique such reductionism or to respond to the possible objections to the possible objections to emergence (especially regarding the relation between chemistry and biology). But I think the idea of emergence can illuminate the human reality we come to know through literature by extending Polanyi’s argument, proposing a final distinctive level of reality even within the human domain.

I alluded earlier to the way in which our habitual ways of making sense of our experience depend upon the conventions into which we are socialized, and that these conventional understandings often prove to be inadequate to our experience, sometimes radically so. I would now propose that we understand these conventions to belong to a certain “level” of reality which I would call “socially constructed reality,” with particular reference to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and 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

¹⁵ cf TD Ch. 2 and PK pp. 393-397

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 functional for a given society but would but would be “really normative.” From Polanyi’s perspective, we could see the theory of social construction as posing a problem which, to be solved, would have to find 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 society, but which reaches back into history, forward into the human future, and “upward” or “downward” into those aspects of human experience that are ignored, distorted or denied in the everyday social world: including the normative constraints and demands we feel which are not adequately explained by and may even contradict conventional notions of goodness, and realities such as death, 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 *depth dimension* to human life—recognizing that reality exceeds our conventional constructions of it, and that it 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 mimesis 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.

V. Toward a Practice of Reading—“Post-Critical Criticism”

If one comes to know some human reality through the inquiry provoked by a work of literature, what does this practice of inquiry, or 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.”¹⁶

From the Polanyian perspective, what happens when we read Tolstoy’s story, insofar as it “moves” us, is that in focally attending to what is happening in the story, we integrate our own fear of death and knowledge of the conditions of human life which are what allow us to make sense of the story (in some measure) and find it persuasive. We attend from the words on the page to their meanings—the events described—and from each successive event to some gradually emerging comprehensive whole, which allows us to understand what is being narrated—we follow the story. That whole is not merely the whole of the work, but of the realities to which the work refers. We grasp a coherence—a reality—that allows us to integrate all the subsidiaries of our reading—or rather, we experience those subsidiaries *as* integrated and thereby, for the duration of reading the story and perhaps beyond, inhabit a world populated by the new coherences created by our reading. What allows us to feel an identification with Ivan and his situation, despite the fact that he is a 19th century Russian lawyer with a terminal disease, and we are (or may be) 21st century Americans in perfectly good health? It is, one might say, the shared human reality of death.

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 (although this may also come from institutional authority or the authority of the tradition—I may not immediately be able to make *any* sense 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.

Interpretation is one attempt to know the reality that the poem represents, but if treated as the end of reading poetry it is—as has been extensively if not exhaustively argued—misconceived, 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. Polanyi himself notes that the analysis of the poem destroys its meaning, because to analyze it is to focus on the subsidiaries rather than looking through them (TD).

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. (IV)

She proposes that “[w]hat we need instead of a hermeneutics is an erotics of art,” which would involve attention to and description of the formal features and the sensuous experience of art without trying to

¹⁶ *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, 297.

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 our sense that we come to *know* something through literature.)

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 your 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 in response to them.