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### Polanyi and Literary Studies

What are the implications of Polanyi's thought for literary study? As others have already said, Polanyi shows us that literary criticism is a personal act; as such, it is neither subjective nor objective (Hall 25). Phil Mullins describes how, from a Polanyian perspective, the critic's interpretation of a text is inherently integrative and embodied. The interpretive act is performed with skill by one guided by passion and embedded in a convivial community. Working within a traditional framework, literary critics in conversation with one another form interpretations that are "held by the person but directed toward—and reflective of—the community" (42). In this way, Polanyi's post-critical philosophy, as M. Elizabeth Wallace put it, "relieves us of two unrealistic desires": "either to make literary criticism more 'scientific,' striving for kinds of order and precision not appropriate to it, or irresponsibly to declare it so distinct from science, from any form of objective knowledge, that sustained inquiry, the responsibilities of consensus, and forms of precision necessary and appropriate to the study of literature and language are abandoned" (12).

I would like to add to this discussion by offering some notes about the relationship of literature and reality suggested by Polanyi's works. If we agree that the study of literature, like science, is an activity rooted in personal knowing, it is worth asking how and in what ways we are making contact with reality when we read, analyze, and interpret literature. On the one hand, literature is its own reality—it is a comprehensive entity whose significance is not easily exhausted. Perhaps this alone makes literature worthy of our attention. When we discover something about a text, we have discovered some aspect of reality, a discovery of which we are convinced and which we are compelled to share.

But it is not hard to see that literature may have an additional bearing on reality. Inasmuch as literary works contribute to our individual and cultural intellectual heritage, they contribute to our everyday coping and sense-making in ways that go well beyond explicit literary interpretation. Put another way, literature is persuasive. Skilled reading—which can be achieved by both lay persons and experts—requires indwelling and a receptiveness to be changed by the experience. But such receptiveness opens us up to certain hazards. How do we know in those instances when we are carried away by a literary text that we are going to be changed in a way that we would wish to be changed, that we are not allowing ourselves to be deluded, or flattered, or manipulated? It does no good to say that reality plays no part in the experience, that literature is not affirming anything and therefore cannot be true or false. When a symbol or a poem or a character or a narrative gets us to enter into its meaning, it moves us with a persuasive vision of the world—a vision that may exert its influence on us long after we step out of it. How might we approach these powerfully moving texts? Below I briefly enumerate what I see as six ways of engaging with literature that emerge from Polanyi's post-critical philosophy. Considering ways that we can and do respond to the allure of an imaginative vision may help us better understand how these interactions influence our abilities to make sense of experiences and our place in the world. It may also lead to a better understanding of the place of literary study in a free society.

1. **Not engaging:** Before I discuss ways of engaging with literature, it should be noted that not engaging—through inattentiveness, lack of exposure to literature, inability to read, or deliberate choice not to read—is also an option. Those of us who have not read everything that has ever been written have exercised this option from time to time. Unwillingness or inability to read serves both as protection from the hazards of reading and as a barrier to knowing. As I mention below, Polanyi suggests that a

fuller coming into ourselves as human beings requires that we make contact with art, myth, or ritual. Without these, we remain as mere clever animals attempting to master our surroundings (M 121, 124).

**2. Clinical detachment:** One step up from not engaging with literature is what I am calling “clinical detachment.” In *Meaning* there is a brief echo of Polanyi’s early life in medicine that suggests this approach to literature. Having described indwelling as a sharing of life between one person and another person or an animal, Polanyi notes that there may be occasions when “such sharing might be most unwelcome”: “Medical students must harden themselves against being overwhelmed by the spectacle of the surgical opening of a human body” (138). If knowing arises out of indwelling, what he is emphasizing here is that we may willingly refuse to engage in deep knowing. What the student is hardening himself against is a too vivid participation in the patient’s life. An opportunity to know the patient more deeply is here purposely resisted so that the doctor can focus on the subsidiaries of the patient’s body. This rejection is similar to the hypothetical skeptic in *Personal Knowledge* who by withholding all belief breaks all contact with reality (PK 315). The doctor’s refusal to indwell in the life of the patient is a refusal to make contact with an aspect of reality: in this case, the reality of the patient’s suffering, powerlessness, and mortality. His choice makes sense in the context of his profession. It also reminds us of one hazard of knowing—namely, that knowing requires a willingness to surrender to reality and, as such, a willingness to be moved or changed by the encounter. “Hardening” ourselves against reality’s overtures prevents this pliability, but it also prevents knowing. Conversely, surrendering oneself entails personal vulnerability: We open ourselves up to a change in being. Reality—whether a comprehensible entity or an articulate system—is here given the power to act upon us. To engage in the action of knowing is to willingly allow oneself to be modified.

We can see such clinical detachment in some aspects literary studies, especially in critique and pure formalism. As the doctor above, critics may harden themselves against a text’s influence for the purposes of achieving another end. Such hardening may be a pre-cursor to deeper knowing, as in the case of one training to recognize and understand formal elements of a text. Isolating formal features allows us to focus on subsidiaries of aesthetics and artistic choice in order to more skillfully re-integrate them later on. Our skillful integration of aesthetic subsidiaries is necessary for us to understand the beauty of a literary achievement. But hardening ourselves to the influence of the whole may also prevent knowing. Polanyi suggests as much in his comments on pure formalism: “But we know that the mere concentration of focal attention on the semantic medium leads merely to the destruction of meaning; so we see that pure formalism would set itself the wrong aim. The physical elements of a poem are poetic only if they are noticed in terms of something else and make that other stand out thereby in itself (and vice-versa)” (Theory of Poetry 1-2).

Clinical detachment is also the dominant position of critique, whose purpose, as Rita Felski and others point out, is not to be moved by a text or to understand it but to uncover the hidden motives of power working discursively through it (2-4). Being moved, in this formulation, is being naïve or worse complicit with structures of oppression. Note, for example, Bruce Robbins’ fear that if critical distance were not maintained (that is, if we were not to harden ourselves against a text) the result would be “a criticism that is closer to fandom, a profession that is closer to the industry’s dollars- and- cents metric and its rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would- be consumer” (372). What this view suggests is that one barrier to literary engagement is the fear of being influenced by the texts themselves. Better not to enter into the patient’s suffering than to lose oneself in it.

**3. Thorough Surrender:** At the other end of the spectrum, in opposition to clinical detachment, is total surrender. In *Meaning*, Polanyi uses the example of the Bororo to illustrate totemism, an approach to knowing whereby a people share so deeply in the life of an animal that they perceive a kinship with it. The Bororo's participation in the life of the red parrot, he explains, is so vivid that they "seem to think that they and the red parrots belong to the same class"—a belief that is similar to that of modern man who dwells so deeply in the scientific outlook that he sees himself as a kind of automaton (139). In contrast to the medical student or doctor, who when presented with an opportunity to participate in the life of a patient must choose to forego such knowing, the Bororo accept the invitation to know the red parrot but, in participating too vividly in its life, experience a distorted relationship to reality, just as our relationship to reality has been distorted by a too vivid participation in the scientific outlook. The example of the Bororo and modern man illustrate the hazard of dwelling too deeply in a single aspect of reality: the red parrot in the case of the Bororo or the articulate system of science in the case of the modern. Thus, just as hardening oneself against change prevents us from making contact with reality, so too does "softening" ourselves too thoroughly to the potentially totalizing influences of narrow slices of reality.

This seems to be the fear of those like Robbins who support the clinical detachment of critique. The critical stance is better than "fandom" or, worse, indoctrination. When placed next to the example of the Bororo, the tendency to "clarify our lives" by art leads potentially to the hazard of dwelling too deeply in imaginative worlds. Notice, for example, how a figure like Don Quixote experiences a distorted version of reality similar to the Bororo. He has over-indwelt chivalric romances and participated in them so vividly that he perceives the world through their totalizing framework. Actual readers, too, sometimes experience similar effects. C.S. Lewis, for example, describes the error of students who adopt from tragedy a "tragic view of life," a way of filtering experiences with mortality that distort its baser, mundane elements (75). I have also had students describe encounters with fictional worlds that were so profound that the texts become the lens through which the students claim to be filtering their experiences. In such cases, the texts which are indwelt take on a totalizing role in the reader's intellectual framework. If we blur the line between literature and rhetoric, we may also add here the engagement of Marxists or others who have been carried away by an "all-pervasive" ideology (M 107). Literature and rhetoric would thus be working in the same capacity to set loose a moving imaginative vision of the world that elicits our surrender (M 106-107).

**4. Appropriation:** In addition to hardening oneself against or surrendering too thoroughly to a text, Polanyi's comments about the stability of interpretive frameworks also suggest that we may sometimes appropriate texts to conform to an idiom of belief. This is the charge that Brian Vickers leveled against contemporary literary criticism in *Appropriating Shakespeare*, where he argues that the rival schools of literary theory—specifically, the approaches of deconstruction, new historicism, psychoanalysis, feminism, Christianity and Marxism—are rooted in ideologies that serve as "templates with which to interpret Shakespeare" (xii). As such, the readings of contemporary critics, he argues, "distort the text as experienced in the theatre or in private reading to make it fit their critical theories or ideologies" (xvi). Compare Vickers' description of literary theory with the passage from Arthur Koestler that Polanyi sometimes quotes: "My party had equipped my mind with such elaborate shock absorbing buffers and elastic defenses that everything seen and heard became automatically transformed to fit a preconceived pattern" (KB 31, PK 288). Vickers is agreeing with Polanyi that some intellectual frameworks are best described as "closed systems of thought. . .capable of accommodating any conceivable new piece of

evidence” (31). Literature, Vickers suggests, can be experienced merely as new evidence to be subsumed by a totalizing idiom of belief. Such critics, we might say, risk mistaking “the all-embracing interpretative powers of this framework as evidence of its truth” (PK 288).

**5. Contemplation (Transcendence):** The approach to literature that Polanyi characterizes as most appropriate to its reality as an aesthetic object is contemplation. I have broken this up into two categories, because there seems to be a difference between the contemplation of art which leads to a moment of transcendence—a pure breaking out into a different reality—and the contemplation of art that bears on our everyday sense-making—the residue of transcendence that stays with us when we return to ordinary time. In *Personal Knowledge* the contemplation of art is a correlate to discovery in the sciences as well as a state willfully entered into. “Scientific discovery,” he writes, “bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in *an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision*. And while it is thus breaking out, the mind is for the moment *directly experiencing its content* rather than controlling it by the use of any pre-established modes of interpretation: it is overwhelmed by its own passionate activity” (196 emphasis mine). This experience of content, brief and direct, during the moment of discovery is like the transcendent experience of contemplating art. Such contemplation “dissolves” conceptual frameworks, allowing us to “become immersed” in pure experience (PK 197). Without undergoing these kinds of contemplative experiences, Polanyi explains, we are like Clever Hans, bound to our surroundings and occupied with their clever mastery. It is only in the experience of myth or any great work of art that we are able to “transcend [d] all observable objects and extend [d] the imagination far beyond any possible experienced horizon” (M 121). It is a stepping outside of ordinary time and becoming something else. As Polanyi writes in “Acceptance of Religion” the “brief action” of encountering the power of symbols—of achieving symbolic meaning—emerges from “our capacity to become to some extent other [r] else than we are. . . for becoming a sacred way of our choice” (143). If we are moved in this capacity, we have encountered something real, for we cannot help accredit these integrations as valid (PK 202; M 134). Our susceptibility to being moved this way depends on our familiarity with artistic standards—good or bad—and other commitments that allow for the plausibility of the artist’s vision to persuade us to surrender. Bad art that draws our attention to its technical errors or that lacks verisimilitude or internal consistency will not be able to seduce us. Nor would some forms of great art should our own unfamiliarity with aesthetic standards get in the way. We might also choose to purposely reject the advances of texts we find in our personal judgment to be unethical (cf. Booth *Company* 483-489). Conversely, a relative expertise in everyday language joined with a comparative lack of training in aesthetics (or history, philosophy, ethics) may lead us to find plausible and moving some visions that would not move those who had experienced a greater range of cultural achievements.

**6. Contemplation (Return):** This experience of transcendent contemplation is bound inextricably to the temporally limited moment of reading. At some point, however, we must return to the ordinary world. Polanyi argues that these transcendent experiences have the capacity to affect our conceptual frameworks. One such effect I have already identified above as “thorough surrender.” We can dwell so deeply that we never quite return. Rather than a contemplation that leads back to a position of greater control over ourselves and over our environment, in the state of thorough surrender we remain lost to the artist’s vision. It becomes for us a kind of totalizing vision. A more complete return from a transcendent contemplation leaves us changed in other ways.

a. Breaking out of idioms of belief: Just as literature can contribute to or be appropriated by totalizing interpretive frameworks, so too can it be involved in the “shattering of spectacles” that occurs when

closed systems are abandoned (KB 31). Though perhaps not as radical as Koestler's conversion away from Marxism, something like a conversion seems to have happened to Polanyi. At the center of his experience of holding and rejecting materialism was literature. In a letter to Karl Mannheim, he explains, "As a boy and young man I was a materialist and an eager disciple of H. G. Wells. My religious interests were awakened by reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1913. I was then 22. For the following 10 years I was continually striving for religious understanding and for a time, particularly from 1915 to 1920, I was a completely converted Christian on the lines of Tolstoy's confession of faith" (qtd. in Moleski and Scott 194). Polanyi's encounter with Dostoyevsky marked a significant turning point away from one system of thought toward another. Whether sudden or gradual, the experience of dwelling contemplatively in literature can have the effect of allowing us to break out of intellectual frameworks in such a way that closed systems of thought cease to have a hold over us (PK 200-201). Unlike a more thorough surrender, this kind of contemplation stops short of domination. Having questions raised by Dostoyevsky, encountering a moving imaginary world, is different than believing that you are one of those characters—of twisting other forms of evidence into the pattern provided by this fictional world, as might have happened had he more thoroughly surrendered.

b. Embodying Literature: To a lesser extent, the continuing development of an interpretive framework always entails a breaking up of previous structures (PK 196). In this process, the contemplation of literature contributes more generally to the "soil of our mental development" (PK 286)—that is, to the construction and modification of a conceptual framework that eventually becomes an idiom of belief which we use to make sense of our experiences (PK 286, 197). As Wayne Booth put it, "Without art we would not know some things that through art we come to know" (*Modern* 169). As with other tools of knowing, we interiorize literary works, making them a part of ourselves in order to bring them to bear subsidiarily in the course of other interpretive acts (KB 183). This is not the totalizing surrender of a Bororo or a Don Quixote. We submit to literary texts and allow ourselves to be modified by them, but only partially. As we accept a text into our being, we temper our submission with a dissent that allows us to claim it for ourselves (PK 209). This is the kind of surrender that those of us who have been shaped by literature would find most familiar. Note, for example, Polanyi's own experience with the Hungarian poet Ady, whose work contributed to Polanyi's tacit understanding of culture and human action. As Moleski and Scott explain, Ady's "poetic emphasis on the universal human experience over against the poet's own personal feelings," his movement toward a "wider sense of morality and affirmation of life" resonated with the philosophical concerns of Polanyi, who would still be able to quote Ady in the final years of his life (17, 294). In this sense, we can say that when we contemplate literature and allow it to modify our intellectual framework, we increase the tacit reservoir that we draw from when we seek to make contact with realities about the human condition and our place in the world. Ideally, these contributions do not simply modify but refine our frameworks, making them better subsidiary tools to use in the process of knowing. There can be a pernicious side to this form of influence, too, if we become immersed in a variety of texts that center on the beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of one group of people or that re-inforce the cultural assumptions about ourselves and others that ought to be challenged.

c. Portable insight: Finally, we do not lose access to transcendence. The portability of literature's artistic frame makes possible an indeterminate range of future irreversible integrations. Ideally, the portability of literary insight helps us maintain a conceptual framework that remains flexible, rather than closed. The source of this flexibility may be found in an important difference between discovery and

contemplation. Although scientists can contemplate scientific excellence and experience an intensity of passion in the presence of its grandeur, the irreversible insight of discovery is achieved only once. It is then possessed in its entirety and used in reversible operations to gain intellectual control over the environment (PK 200; M 101). The insights sustained in literature's contemplation, in contrast to scientific discoveries, are not possessed in the same way. Literature is best "used" in the relinquishing of control and directly entering the experience of an ecstatic vision. The portability of literature allows us to re-enter its vision and continue to feed of its fire (M 101). In *Meaning*, Polanyi notes that such contemplation may also be thought of as a holding together of incompatibles in the achievement of greater meaning. It is a "clarification" of our lives as we dwell subsidiarily in a text and in the loose scraps of our experience in order to achieve a moment of understanding (M 109, 145). As an act of knowing, this kind of experience always requires our deep participation. As with discovery, the achievement of this kind of meaning is part of the destruction and construction of tacitly held intellectual frameworks. We can "use" these moments of insight subsidiarily for future acts of knowing as scientific discoveries are "used" to achieve greater contact with reality—though the insights of literature are not used reversibly. Put another way, the insights that we achieve through literature can be used as tools in our quest to make contact with reality. But because they always entail a greater personal participation, they are used differently than the precepts or discoveries of more closed and self-contained systems of thought. Unlike a system that expands to remain stable in the face of novel situations, the unsystematic discoveries of literary experience allows us to remain flexible and amenable to new encounters with reality. We need not too rigidly map explanatory systems onto novel or complex situations but can achieve greater understanding by dwelling subsidiarily in past or re-enacted literary encounters.

Here are some possible illustrations of using literature irreversibly to gain greater understanding of novel situations. First, note Polanyi describing the sensation of coming to realize that Hitler would be defeated and that the world was entering a new age: "So I sit alone in my office and feel as that solitary 'watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken'. . . 'full of wild surmise.' . . . we now know again that Progress and civilisation, Reason and Liberty are real and that they will have to be maintained and spread everywhere by the might of tanks and planes" (qtd. in Scott and Moleski 181). Polanyi here does not try to convey his feelings in the precise language of science—of physical and chemical reactions—nor does he use a denotative language to describe the realizations occurring to him as he sat in his office. Instead, he draws on poetry. Keats had already captured and evoked in his poem an understanding of experience that Polanyi found relevant to this novel situation. Thus, Polanyi recalls his own reading and understanding of the poem to articulate and understand his own experience. Another, more exaggerated, example can be found in the fictional Darmok language appearing in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The Darmok species communicate by citing well-known stories. Thus, when Captain Picard needs to tell the alien Darmok ship that their captain has died, he says only, "Shakka, when the walls fell." By saying this, Picard asks his auditors to recall the story of Shakka, to remember it, relive it, and to use it subsidiarily as a tool to understand the meaning and import of this new situation. These kinds of uses are what I think Polanyi has in mind when he argues that the portability of literature allows us to clarify our lives by it and to feed of its fire. Not only can we re-read a text, which may lead to novel interpretations, but we carry texts with us in memory and re-call them periodically. They thus act as subsidiaries—both consciously and unconsciously—in our ongoing efforts to make sense of the world.

What all of this suggests is that literature is worthy of study because it has the capacity to deeply move us; the beauty of its aesthetic achievement draws us into a transcendent experience and sets free an imaginative vision which may have significant, lasting effects on the frameworks from which we draw to form those integrations that help us make sense of the world and our place in it. We ignore this capacity at our peril. Nor should we guard too closely against it—for hardening ourselves against literature is not to close ourselves to all influence; it simply opens us up to other, more systematized or simplistic accounts of what it means to be human and how we ought to live. To achieve a deeper, more enriched understanding of ourselves and our place in the world it is worth the risk of surrender. A post-critical approach to literary study recognizes the persuasive powers of literature as well as the possibility of a reader both to surrender and dissent, to enter and return. It also recognizes that public support of the study of literature in the university is central to our shared commitment to the pursuit of truth: Great works of art, identified and preserved by experts for ordinary people, remind us that truth “transcend[s] and is never fully grasped by any particular explicit rendering” (Cannon 78). If we do not support the study and experience of art, which is also the preservation and transmission of artistic achievement, we become more susceptible as a culture to totalizing ideologies and those political, religious, or commercial forces that would seek to control what we find meaningful.

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