TOWARD A POST-CRITICAL LITERARY THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Meaning as Polanyi's statement on aesthetics. The core of his aesthetic theory emphasizes the power of art to move the imagination. I examine metaphors he uses for this kind of movement—descent along a gradient, indwelling, and transcendence—and suggest implications for literary study.

When Charles Taylor spoke to the Polanyi Society in 2015, Stanley Scott made the following observation during the Q and A session: "Polanyi's idea of a tacit dimension strikes philosophy as a great revelation, and yet it's sort of old news to poets, writers of scripture, prophets, who tend to speak not in what we today call the language of philosophy and science but in metaphor" (Lowney 2017, 45). He then suggested that understanding the tacit dimension "could be the very lynchpin of recognizing the point at which poetry, philosophy, and science connect" (Lowney 2017, 45). Scott's comments struck me at the time as articulating something I had felt to be profound about *Meaning*. What follows is an extended response to Scott's above observations.

As I see it, in connecting poetry, science, myth, and politics, the "old news" faintly echoed in *Meaning* is that art adorns human life by figuring forth, drawing out, effecting potentialities of individuals and societies. In this way, Polanyi's thought represents a bridge between earlier conceptions of poetry and new forays into cognitive features of literary experience. At a time when some literary critics are endeavoring to articulate a post-critical literary theory that would counterbalance critique, Polanyi's views offer a way forward. Perhaps this is because Polanyi's theory of aesthetics in *Meaning*—as

compiled and aided by Harry Prosch—is not an isolated inquiry relevant only to those of us interested in art; rather, it extends his theory of personal knowing by examining more closely what we mean when we talk about "reality" and by more deeply engaging with the problem of arbitrating between idioms of belief as we seek to distinguish between the real and the illusory.[1] Polanyi's contribution to the study of art in general and literature in particular is not simply that he offers additional commentary about aesthetic experience or our perception of the beautiful, but that he rehabilitates the notion that art and aesthetic experience helps us to make contact with reality. In other words, he shows us how aesthetic experience and aesthetic value cannot be separated from a tendency of the universe to evoke meaning from us.

The Problem of "Aesthetics"

One feature of Polanyian aesthetics in *Meaning* that stands out is its rejection of the common assumption that "aesthetic" is synonymous with "beautiful." In the chapter on validity in art, he explains that the "cornerstone" of his aesthetic theory is not a beauty that merely pleases but "imaginative experience," which we might say is a beauty that moves:

> Aesthetics has spoken through the ages of the harmony and beauty that please us in the arts. But other beauty can also please us. The intellectual beauty of a scientific theory is pleasing, and so is the beauty of a sunset or a woman; and the word 'beauty' is used today very freely to praise an ingenious invention, an elegant combination in chess, or a supreme feat of athletics. But these beauties hardly move our imagination, except in terms of special interests of a personal or professional kind. Beauty of this kind is really too harmonious for art, which depends for its self-assertion on bridging incompatible elements by the powers of its imaginative integration (106).

The pleasure of undergoing an aesthetic experience is not mere delight at perceiving something harmonious but the pleasure of forming coherences of incompatibles: "To move a man aesthetically is to move his imagination to make such integrations" (106). The distinction here between pleasing beauty and imaginative integration is important. It shifts our orientation from aesthetics as the study of the beautiful—if by "beautiful" we mean something that evokes a particular kind of pleasurable sensation—to the study of that which moves us imaginatively. This aligns him with renewed attention to aesthetics and its recent broadening in scope from analysis of formal, sensual features of art to its embeddedness in larger sociopolitical conditions.[2] For literary studies, the implication of this view of aesthetics is—to echo "what poets have always known"—that literature has the capacity to move us toward (or away from) the truth. This is not,

however, a return to what some would see as the "retrograde religion of art" (Felski 2015, 165). It is instead a recognition that "being moved" entails both a recognition and commitment to something we call "real."

Descending, Indwelling, Transcending: Three Metaphors for Being "Moved"

If the core of Polanyi's aesthetics is the experience of being moved to make imaginative integrations, it is worth exploring what this movement entails and how it is related to our attempts to make contact with reality. In *Meaning* he relies on three metaphors for conceptualizing the epistemological significance of experiencing art: the metaphor of descending along a gradient, dwelling in an external being, and transcending time and place.

Descending: Though it comes at the end of *Meaning*, the first metaphor I wish to discuss is that of the "gradient" of meaning. In his chapter on order, Polanyi makes a claim that is central to the new mythology he is attempting to create: namely, that the universe is shaped to evoke meaning from us. Discovery, for example, is an achievement made possible "because we are guided by an intuition of a more meaningful organization of our knowledge of nature provided by the slope of deepening meaning in the whole field of potential meanings surrounding us" (178). A knower, in other words, intuits the presence of a "slope of deepening meaning" and is thrust toward it by the imagination. To illustrate what he means by this slope of meaning, he compares our position as knowers with a boulder on a hill. The presence of the hill's slope does not cause the boulder to descend just as the presence of that which can be known—reality—does not cause us to know it. Instead the slope evokes movement from a boulder that has been pushed just as the slope of what can be known evokes meaning from us once our imagination thrusts us out of rest and guides us down its chosen path (175-176). Whereas the boulder tends toward a minimization of potential energy, the imagination seeks deepening coherences, which we may call a minimization of error or greater contact with reality.[3] Thus the intuition and imagination work together to sense the presence of the gradients of meaning and to move us down their slopes and along their landscapes toward truth (178), the fullness of which is the unachievable cosmic totality—the final solution to all problems that can be thought.

There are several implications of conceptualizing knowing as this descent along a gradient. First, it suggests a nuanced view of truth and falsehood. Truth exists as a global minimum, but our material embeddedness enables us only to journey toward but never reach this final destination, even as we reach resting points in some of our problem spaces. Knowing, here, is rendered not as a matter of binary true or false but as location in relation to a low point. If you are farther up the slope and I am farther down, I might say that I am "right" and you are "wrong" even though we are both

removed from the lowest point possible. In another sense, you could be farther up the slope but imaginatively striving in a direction that will eventually lead to a steep drop while I am farther down but stuck in an ideological well that hinders my ability to move. In this way, the Azande, the Bororo, and the modern are moving toward a basin but, perhaps, from different sides of the mountain. More importantly for a study of literature, Polanyi's reference to gradients of meaning allows us to better grasp the experience of "being moved" by literature as an epistemological event. Powerful texts set loose an imaginative vision of the world which moves our imagination (104). Being moved by these texts is more than feeling a pleasurable sensation at encountering something harmonious, symmetrical, or subjectively beautiful. It is to have the imagination bring our minds to a place where some aspect of reality can be known and to chart a path toward it. Literature, in other words, is persuasive. And being persuaded is not being tricked, but being given the ability to make contact with reality. We cannot even begin the journey toward truth without a self-compelled thrust of imagination or the attractiveness of an imaginative vision that pulls us out of rest. In addition, the density of information that we encounter and process gives rise to a multitude of such problem spaces so that we exist simultaneously on different points on multiple hills, plateaus, valleys. "Truth" in this metaphor is simultaneously universal and perspectival, attained and unattainable.

Indwelling: Another metaphor for being moved imaginatively is indwelling. Two definitions appear in *Meaning*. In the first sense of the term, that which we dwell in becomes as part of our body. This form of indwelling results in what he calls "self-centered" integration because we move from that which is indwelt subsidiarily to that which is known focally (71). Thus, we "know" what is indwelt as we know other subsidiaries, and it becomes transparent as we attend to the focal whole. Language, for example, becomes transparent when it is fully indwelt; we use it as part of our body for the purpose of communication similar to how we use our eyes for perception. In the case of comprehensive entities such as living beings, we dwell in the particulars of their life—their gestures, expressions, utterances, behavior, performances—in order to know them as a whole. This is a more substantial interiorization which he calls "participation." To participate in the life of another is to know them by a kind of fusion of selves. I live the particulars of another—I interiorize those particulars subsidiarily—in order to know the whole of the other (143). This form of indwelling is also a type of surrender, for to interiorize something exterior as a means for knowing is to allow it to change an existing intellectual framework. Especially in the case of comprehensive entities, that which is indwelt changes us existentially and influences our means of distinguishing truth from falsehood by modifying our judgments about what is and is not plausible (144).

In addition to the indwelling that occurs with such self-centered integrations, a second understanding of indwelling—symbolization—involves the pouring out of

the self into that which is known. This is a different kind of fusion of self and other which he calls "self-giving" (72-5). Whereas that which is indwelt in the self-centered sense becomes transparent in its pointing to the focal whole, that which is indwelt in self-giving sense receives and embodies its subsidiaries—namely, the diffuse parts of ourselves. The focal whole becomes simultaneously that which is indwelt—for example, an artwork (80)—and the subsidiaries which we use to indwell. When our attention is carried back to them, they become a "felt unity," a "tacit grasp of ourselves as a whole person" (75). Thus the activity of being carried away is itself an emergent novelty (87). It is in this second kind of indwelling that we come to know ourselves most fully. In the regular flow of time, our experiences exist incoherently in our memory and reverberate indefinitely in the inarticulate realms of our tacit reservoir. When a symbol moves our imagination in such a way as to convince us to pour ourselves into it, the loose and inchoate fragments of our existence cohere and find shape in the symbol. In the moment that we undergo this experience, we achieve a deeper understanding of our own existence. Though the full activity of this knowing is always temporally limited, this kind of knowing remains physically embodied in the symbol. Thus, we may return to it, and by attending to this symbol we may continue to "clarify our lives by it" (109). That is, we may again dwell in undergo the activity of knowing ourselves more fully.

Both of these senses of indwelling occur in his example of the Bororo tribesman who participate so vividly in the life of the red parrot that they "seem to think that in some ways they and the red parrots belong to the same class" (139). In this example, what begins with the first kind of indwelling—dwelling in the particulars of a comprehensive entity in order to know it as a whole—becomes the second kind—a surrender of self into the entity that now embodies and reflects back upon the knower. It is not just that the Bororo "know" the red parrot but that the red parrot embodies them symbolically. They *are* the red parrot. Similarly, modern man pours himself conceptually into the automaton, believing ourselves to be product of physiochemical laws working themselves out along purely mechanical lines (139).

Transcending: In relation to art, the second kind of indwelling produces as its emergent a moment of transcendence. This metaphor is found in his distinction between "natural" and "transnatural" integrations. Both natural and transnatural integrations require the work of the imagination. But just as some comprehensive entities are more real than others, some integrations enable us to make contact with a deeper reality. The distinction between the two is found in the relation of the integration to reality. Natural integrations correspond to our knowing of the particulars of the world; transnatural to cosmic totality. Natural integrations are formed in our interactions with our immediate surroundings. These include those coherences that contribute to the skillful navigation of our environment, including the perception of basic regularities and even basic facility with what Polanyi calls indicative language (70). Clever Hans embodies

the mode of being associated with natural integrations. Though he knows enough to seek advantages in his environment, he lives only in the present, "hedged in by [his] surroundings" (121) and "shut up in his own mode of existence" (128). This is a purely subjective mode of being.

Humans, in contrast, have the ability to form transnatural coherences which allow us to transcend our subjectivity and our immediate surroundings. Unlike Clever Hans who is trapped by the present and the immediate, we move beyond observable objects to the world as a whole in an imaginative extension beyond experience when we achieve transnatural integrations (121). In these moments we are "filled …with inexhaustible significance" as we experience a time outside of time and a reality beyond place (128). The distinction is thus not found in the difference between natural and artificial or automatic and imaginative. It is to be found in the distinction between those integrations that "work in our mundane world"—such as perception, indicative language, scientific precepts—and those that exist outside of material reality—such as symbols, art, and myth that carry us away from everyday existence (125). Transnatural integrations detach us from everyday existence and bring us into contact with a reality that exceeds but also permeates the particulars of our individual existence.

In distinguishing between the natural and transnatural Polanyi places the experience of the transcendent at the foundation of the initiation into the personal mode of being. We cannot engage in personal knowing without achieving transnatural coherences. What makes us fully human—what initiates us into an existence as knowers and as people committed to higher order principles—is the kind of intellectual act that occurs when we rightly contemplate art. To seriously engage with an art work is to exercise the same skill we use to understand our calling. And we know that we are doing this not simply because of any strong sensation, though that might be part of it, but by our being "carried away" in another sense—by entering a mental state whereby we can comprehend the world from a vantage point beyond immediate demands of time and space. It is also the means by which we break the spectacles of ideology.

He brings this understanding of the impermanence of transcendent experience into his theory of personal knowing in such a way as to dissolve the boundaries between the profane and sacred, involved and detached. Between these extremes is the personal. Personal knowing is here more fully reconfigured as the activity of one who has made contact with the divine but who must still live in ordinary time and who must grapple with the constraints of material existence. Such a person is not dispassionate or somehow purged of desire—in this sense he is not "detached" from that mundane existence. Instead desires are oriented toward transcendent obligations (the "echoes" [147] of transnatural experience) and appetites are harnessed in service of these higher operating principles that put us in contact with the realm of the transcendent.

Such a configuration draws attention to those occasions that bring us into transcendence. Whereas we may engage in a mystical contemplation of nature, it is our art, myth, and other articulate contributions of culture that also attract us in such a deeply moving way that we are carried away from our subjective, immediate, material experience. Such mediums can rightly be called rhetorical or persuasive as they present an attractive imaginative vision that elicits our attention and sets loose its vision. Dwelling in these frameworks enables greater contact with reality while simultaneously opening us up to error (124-124). Dwelling in aesthetic visions is deeply persuasive, influencing what we are able to judge as plausible. The experience of the transcendent—achieved through transnatural integrations—may potentially re-order our deepest commitments, but without such experiences our existence would "mean much less to us" (109) and we would have no commitments outside of a biological imperative to survive.

I have drawn attention to these metaphors to suggest that the core of Polanyi's aesthetics is a certain kind of epistemological event: an experience of being deeply "moved" in the presence of something real. In doing so, I have shifted focus away from the sections in the text where he tries to define art and to distinguish between aesthetic objects—those objects set off by an aesthetic "frame" which embodies cognitive content. This is not to suggest that there is no place for discussing the boundaries between art and everything that is not art in Polanyi's writing. Rather it is to resist a tendency to focus too much on such distinctions at the expense of recognizing what he suggests are continuities between various types of persuasive visions, including scientific writing, political rhetoric, poetry and narrative, ideology, and myth. If we push some of Polanyi's more inchoate ideas in *Meaning* to their limits, the rigid distinctions between art and non-art, indicative and symbolic, "open-eyed" and political, begin to break down. Even the most indicative of texts, for example, combines a persuasive frame with cognitive content, and the all-encompassing visions in which we dwell most deeply are embodied and given shape in "loose" patterns of our daily living—everyday rituals which fail to transport us but that nevertheless work as unexamined spectacles in our engagement with our surroundings.[4] None of us may truly be a Clever Hans living in a purely subjective mode. Yet somehow dwelling on the metaphors for knowing that Polanyi provides can help us better understand the mental oscillations that contribute to our ability to perceive reality in its many manifestations.

Implications for a Post-Critical Literary Theory

If the imagination is so central to knowing, how ought we to approach powerfully moving texts? Below are several implications for a post-critical literary theory that follow from *Meaning*. This is not an exhaustive list but a gesture toward connecting the above metaphors with critical practice. Some of these suggestions will seem retrograde

in their barest form. Understood from a Polanyian perspective, however, they bridge the gap between competing critical worlds.

First, readers must surrender themselves to powerful texts. Though many have expressed dissatisfaction with the dominant stance of critical detachment in literary studies, the fear is that losing objectivity and critical distance would mean a return to a politically naïve, quasi-religious approach to literature.[5] Polanyi shows that critical distance in its most extreme forms prevents genuine acts of knowing. A post-critical approach to reading begins by acknowledging that the proper response to powerfully moving art is to be moved. Thus, an important aspect of literature is its ability to move a reader's imagination. This movement is not mere entertainment or pleasurable stimulation but a genuine act of knowing something that we can say is real. The act of surrendering oneself to a reading—of pouring oneself into a text—is a necessary and primary component of the post-critical approach, as is the recognition that this experience will follow us as "echoes" when we leave a text. This is not, however, to say that post-critical is uncritical. Though we must be willing to surrender ourselves to a text and though such a surrender will likely lead to existential change, a post-critical approach recognizes a plurality of commitments that complement the experience of surrender and allows us to more fully return from the reading experience. Unlike the Bororo who dwell so deeply in the life of the red parrot that their indwelling becomes all encompassing, our fusion with the world of a text is not totalizing. Literature exists within the larger cultural environment filled with other texts and messages seeking to persuade us. We recognize that everyone surrenders to something, and we see the study of literature as an inoculation against the all-encompassing totalizing frameworks offered to us by political, commercial, and religious sources. Thus, a post-critical approach to literature, would resist both extremes associated with surrendering to literature: At one end, a total fusion of the kind seen in Don Quixote, who views the world as if it were a chivalric romance, or in C.S. Lewis's students, who take from tragedy the Tragic View of life (77) and, at the other end, a clinical detachment that closes itself off from being moved by a text in order to protect itself from its shaping power.

Second, scholarly communities help individual readers in their quest to know. Although *Meaning* emphasizes the effects of an individual's encounter with a text, these points are framed within a larger discussion about the place of meaning in a free society. An individual's ability to be moved by literature depends on the supporting structures of the wider social context: namely, a government that does not have (or seek) the power "to control what people find meaningful" through propaganda, violence, or the control of communication (182). It also depends on a general respect for the kinds of spiritual ends—for example, truth and artistic achievement—that accompany the writing and reading of literature. This is how Polanyi's view of art answers the fears of those who say that shifting away from the clinical detachment of critique risk turning

literary criticism into a kind of politically disengaged, naive fandom.[6] A community of professional literary scholars and critics would support and complement the individual reading experience by cultivating a tradition of texts that are worthy of being encountered and by teaching formal standards to students, who, though they remain lay readers, achieve the skill to enter into the world of texts that may have been too difficult without initiation into the habits and methods of literary reading. Without such a community, individuals would have a lesser ability and fewer opportunities to engage with "great" works and would instead be guided toward the superficially entertaining. Thus, a post-critical approach recognizes the necessity of training in order to engage in art in a way that resists the mere flattering of subjectivity. A post-critical approach is, thus, firmly rooted in broader aims of liberal arts tradition and recognizes that there is intense competition among mythical structures and that the variety of experiences embodied in literature helps us to continue to thrust our imagination forward so as not to remain with overly fossilized, all-encompassing myths or to be susceptible to propaganda.

Third, analysis of formal features of literary works is important and worthwhile. A post-critical literary approach would advocate the value of analyzing formal features of literature. This is not a return to an aesthetic criticism that analyzes form in isolation. Rather it is a recognition that dwelling in particulars can lead to a better understanding of the comprehensive entity that is a work of literature. It is also a recognition of the presence of an artistic problem and solution as well as a significant source of the power of a text to move our imagination. The formal approach to literature, from a post-critical perspective, is always embedded within the larger project of knowing literature and reality. In this way, Polanyi suggests an attention to form that would align with current work exploring various kinds of immersive experiences.[7] What Polanyi adds to these contemporary accounts is a greater recognition of their continuity with every form of knowing and being, from perception and movement to the coordination of a life's work. In this way, he points toward a view of aesthetics as itself embodied in conduct, both in the moment of encounter with art, and in performance of rituals and aesthetic gestures in everyday life. Knowing, in this model, is an attached fusion with aesthetic form. Reading immerses us in these forms and helps us to break out of them.[8]

Fourth, a wide variety of critical schools and approaches should be supported and encouraged. A post-critical literary approach might recognize, along with Polanyi, the existence of problem spaces which we discover and traverse. More deeply knowing a text is entering into the questions that it asks and allowing our imagination to be moved in the direction of the answers it presents to us in figurative language. These questions exist as particular gradients among the cosmic total of all problem spaces. Critical commentary of a text can be seen as participating in this shared endeavor. In recognizing the inherent connection to truth, post-critical literary theory does not seek

to obtain from texts propositional truth statements but to enable others to experience a text more fully and to share in its endeavor to solve an intellectual problem. Post critical literary theory would support a wide variety of approaches to the questions texts pose and a plurality methods for learning more about a text. If one function of criticism is to help us return to a text and understand it more fully in light of a variety of critical readings, the language of literary criticism need not be the language of science but may work best when it too draws on metaphor, first-person point of view, and other stylistic features to present an imaginative vision with which to return to a text.

Conclusion

From a Polanyian perspective, 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 how we make sense of the world and understand 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, 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.

ENDNOTES

[1]For debates about the extent to which *Meaning* deviates from Polanyi's other work see the March 1982 issue of *Zygon* 71/1. All citations to *Meaning* will occur in the text.

[2]On the recent debates in literature and art history about the return to aesthetics as both a newly broadened but potentially empty term, see Rose 2017.

[3]I am here importing the concept of error surface used in discussions of machine learning through gradient descent algorithms. Programmers using such models refer to a network's problem space in a manner strikingly similar to Polanyi, who envisions the intuition of a problem as landscape. As a program "learns," its progress can be mapped graphically in a kind of error landscape where temporary, but ultimately incorrect solutions are deemed as "local minima"—small wells along a path toward a "global minimum" or ultimate solution. See, for example, Elman (1999, 17-18).

[4]Consider, for example, the following sentence: "The solution was poured into four containment units." In the context of a scientific article, this would be considered to be indicative—the language not drawing attention to itself but pointing transparently to its meaning. At the same time, however, we are persuaded through the skillful deployment of this indicative frame—the "scientific"

frame—that the writer is competent, objective, and trustworthy. This message is achieved through the aesthetic choices involved in joining cognitive content with an artificial frame in a particular social context for a particular purpose. Compare the same "content" in a different "frame": "My colleague Joe—who has, in the short time he has been in this lab, earned a stellar reputation for dexterity and overall likeability—poured the solution into four leak-proof ACME beakers." Or the following:

> With care, we poured
> Equal portions—portable
> In new cups of four.

Both of these alternative versions represent a change of frame, though one is prose and the other verse. Both would fail to persuade us of the writer's competence, not because they fail to "carry us away" in a striking moment of transcendence but because the first smuggles in meanings that do not strike us as occurring in the moment that we are transported by them. The first, thus, indicates something to us while at the same time "moving" our imagination—i.e. recruiting our tacit knowledge in the formation of an imaginative coherence—without our explicit or conscious realization that we are being moved.

[5]E.g. Felski (2015, 165) and Dancer (2011, 133).

[6]On interpretation of literature and conviviality in scholarly communities in literary studies from a Polanyian perspective, see Phil Mullins. "Recovering the Veridical: Implications of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Literary Studies."

[7]Note, for example Arthur Jacobs' (2015) neurocognitive poetics model (NCPM), which includes foreground and background textual features. Readers, they claim, oscillate between indicative or transparent "background" features which promote the sensation of immersion and those "foreground" elements which draw attention to themselves by presenting difficulty or breaking everyday conventions. Both comprise what Polanyi would call a text's "frame"—the textual embodiment of cognitive content—and both, in the neurocognitive model, flow from a reader's own background (read: tacit) contribution to the text as the reader's expectations are aroused, satisfied, disrupted, and re-configured in a temporal oscillation between familiar and unfamiliar. This lines up with Polanyi's description of symbolic embodiment which carries us away in a transnatural integration as a reader oscillates between the between the dual focal objects of frame-content and self. Those studying the phenomenal cognitive effects of such intense experiences with a text also point to a temporal oscillation between past, present, and future. William Flesch (2001, 200), for example, describes literary reading in a way that comes close to Polanyi's view of temporal transcendence. "At every moment in a poem," he writes, "we are simultaneously there and ahead and behind of where we are." Poetry is thus "a high intensification of the linguistic skill or capacity to project into the present the memories and anticipations of the whole semantic and prosodical unit."

[8]On "aesthetic conduct," see Macé and Jones (2013, 217-218).

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