

Between Articulation and Symbolization: Framing Polanyi and Langer

Robert E. Innis

ABSTRACT Key words: Susanne Langer, Michael Polanyi, articulation, symbolization, explicit, indwelling, gradients, emergence, Gestalt, semiosis, forms, ordered contexts, language, metaphor, limits of language, ineffability, art, religion.

In this article, I sketch the major points of intersection between the work of Michael Polanyi and Susanne Langer. The concepts of articulation and symbolization make up the organizing frame of the article. Langer's semiotic approach to mind and knowing in all their forms intersects in fruitful and challenging ways with Polanyi's approach that is based on the analogy of skills and the model of perception. Rather than being alternatives to one another, or incompatible in essential ways, they enrich one another with respect to "pushing meaning up and down," to art, religion, the emergence of mind, and the limits of language. Their focal concern with types of meanings hold their intellectual projects together in a vital and illuminating tension.

Why would, or even should, someone deeply interested in the work of Susanne Langer turn to Michael Polanyi's work for insight as well as perhaps an intellectual challenge—and vice versa?

My goal here is to frame in "indicative" and schematic fashion the elements of an answer to this question and to offer a set of pointers toward a fuller analysis.¹ I may, as it turns out, be preaching to the choir, but it is my hope that the choir may sense that I have at least been listening to the music.

Starting Points: Symbolization and Tacit Integrations

From the very beginning of her philosophical career, Langer foregrounded the universal human achievement of *symbolization* as the proper theme of philosophical reflection. *Symbolization*, on Langer's account, is an act essential to mind, just as *tacit integration* is for Polanyi. Symbolization, like tacit integration, is the generator of the essential openness of the human animal's world-building. Symbolization is the way humans "articulate" the world: from the lowest stratum of human feeling to the highest levels of cultural achievements. This gave both a "logical" and a "hermeneutical" twist to Langer's lifelong philosophical project.

The "logical" aspect of Langer's work is to be found in her attempt to establish a kind of semiotic backbone to support her analyses of "formed content" that makes up the world of meaning and its chief exemplars. It consists in two distinctions that she never repudiated: (a) between signs functioning on a fundamentally indexical and iconic level (to speak in Peircean terms here) that steer perceptual and behavioral action, allowing organisms to "cut" or "mark" the experiential continuum into "relevant joints," and signs functioning symbolically and (b) between the two *symbolic* types of discursive and presentational symbols, that is, between language and language-like systems and systems that follow a very different, non-discursive semiotic logic.² The "hermeneutical" aspect refers to her contention that *interpretation* as grasp of meaning permeates human life at all levels, both at the lowest level of organically rooted affect and perception, which occur in many ways out of our thematic control, and at the highest levels that mark cultural life in its most "articulate" forms, including the articulate form that is philosophy, the main task of which, for her, is the analysis of "meaning" in the broadest sense of that term. Polanyi, in *Knowing and Being*, called this multileveled continuum of interpretation "sense-

giving and sense-reading” and Langer called it the “symbolic transformation of experience.” Langer’s philosophical investigations from the very beginning of her career take place at, and at all places in between, these two poles or thresholds of meaning: the endosomatic pole of the embodied organism and the exosomatic pole of the symbolic animal. Polanyi’s investigations are also situated here, in spite of, or maybe even because of, the insistence on the “tacit dimension.”

But while Polanyi, influenced by the deep lessons of Gestalt theory’s analysis of perception, was concerned, at the beginning and throughout his career, with the perceptual roots of science, and with an extension of perceptual models to other forms of knowing, Langer was concerned with the symbolic roots of perception, with a kind of spontaneous grasp of emergent and emerging significance already present in configurations in the experiential continuum. Polanyi’s description of his work as “post-critical” points to its ultimate upshot: that human knowing, while it can be embodied in different methods that, ultimately and after much effort, are, or can be, under our control, is still rooted in acts that cannot be formalized or follow a set of explicit rules—although formalization, that is, articulation, leads to complex symbol systems that vastly increase our powers, pre-critical, critical, and post-critical alike. This is also Langer’s position. Polanyi, too, like Langer, pushed meaning-making “down,” in his case to the level of skills of all sorts, as well as “up” to the level of language and all the activities and cultural forms, mathematics, science, the law, built on it as a distinctively human achievement.

The Import of Skills and the Range of Articulation

A proper framing of how Langer’s and Polanyi’s achievements stand to one another must involve noting that Polanyi’s key notion of a “skill,” which emphasizes or rather establishes the tacit matrices of knowing, and the notion of “articulation” are intrinsically connected in a positive way with one another. A skill is, in fact, as I see it, a kind of articulation or articulate structure, just as articulation as an activity and not just an achievement is itself a kind of skill. Skills constitute, or give rise to, comprehensive wholes, as the fertile section on “wholes and meanings” in *Personal Knowledge* clearly and definitively established, with the pivotal, albeit not completely unproblematic, differentiation of existential and representative meanings. Polanyi writes, against the background of the fundamental and indispensable distinction between subsidiary and focal awareness: “When something is seen as subsidiary to a whole, this implies that it participates in sustaining the whole, and we may regard this function as its meaning, within the whole” (PK 58). Polanyi explains:

The distinction between two kinds of awareness allows us readily to acknowledge these two kinds of wholes and two kinds of meaning. Remembering the various uses of a stick, for pointing, exploring or for hitting, we can easily see that anything that functions effectively within an accredited context has a meaning in that context and that any such context will itself be appreciated as meaningful. We may describe the kind of meaning which a context possesses in itself as existential, to distinguish it especially from *denotative* or, more generally, *representative* meaning. In this sense mathematics has an existential meaning, while a mathematical theory in physics has a denotative meaning. The meaning of music is mainly existential, that of a portrait more or less representative, and so on. All kinds of order, whether contrived or natural, have existential meaning; but contrived order usually also conveys a message (PK 58).

The great merit of Polanyi’s analysis is not just that the model of skills enables him to introduce and exploit the notion of a tacit dimension, nor that it, when seen in the light of clues offered by Gestalt theory, furnishes

the foundation for the fundamental distinction between focal and subsidiary awareness, but that it shows that the twin poles of the tacit and the explicit are both forms of articulation in the most basic sense of that term. Just as motoric skills articulate and order the body, and perceptual skills, combined with actions, articulate and order the experiential continuum, so more explicitly symbolic skills articulate and intertwine with these prior domains, transforming them in the process by embodying them in, or extending them into, exosomatic instruments, special types of “contrived order.”

What Polanyi’s labels “articulation” in the famous chapter that follows the one on skills in *Personal Knowledge* is fully consonant with its immediate predecessor, as the analysis of the three types of learning that underpin our linguistic powers clearly shows. Trick learning, sign learning, and latent learning are all themselves *forms of articulation* that manifest the permanent tension between the tacit and the explicit and the logical gap that must be crossed by authentic achievements of all sorts. “To speak is to contrive signs, to observe their fitness, and to interpret their alternative relations; though the animal possesses each of these three faculties, he cannot combine them” (PK 82). Langer, throughout *Mind*, makes substantially the same point: animal intelligence and human mentality are marked by different forms of achievement rooted in bodily powers. But, I think, only a being who is *embodied in the explicit dimension and aware of being so embodied* can become reflectively aware of the tacit dimension and of both the existence and the explicit use of signs, a point Peirce also made. So, in one sense, we can say that recognition of the tacit dimension *as a distinctive form of articulation* is achieved by reflecting, aided by articulate instruments, on the conditions of the possibility of the explicit and of its authentic, indeed articulated, instances. This is the principal task Polanyi set himself at the beginning of *Personal Knowledge*. But running through his work, rooted in the twin affirmations of the analogy of skills (early) and the primacy of perception (early and later), is the theme of a Janus-faced notion of “meaning” as the achievement of “articulation” in the most basic sense of that term. Polanyi in this way “pushes meaning down” while at the same “pushing it up.” It is the construction of a general and nuanced notion of the many forms of meaning and their “logics” that joins Langer and Polanyi at the deepest level.

On Forms and Ordered Contexts: Dividing the Continuum of Experience

Langer’s main, and permanent, thesis is that “meaning accrues essentially to forms” (PNK90). For her, too, the experiential continuum is to be thought of as a *relational network of meaningful, or interpreted, wholes*, or ordered contexts. The pivot of Langer’s work, the idea of “symbolic transformation,” her word for “semiosis,” or sign action, draws attention to the transformation of, or transformative use of, the experiential continuum itself, resulting in the production of various symbolic forms (art, ritual, myth, science, and so forth) that have distinctive “logics” of their own. The job of philosophy is to explore these logics, including “the logic of consciousness” that will play a major role in Polanyi’s work and which Langer explored in depth in her great concluding trilogy, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. Symbolization and experience, Langer will claim, do not stand in opposition to one another, as the opposition of the “abstract” to the “concrete.” For Langer experience, in the human sense, is informed by, indeed permeated by, symbolic principles and features at the very start, while Polanyi will speak of the assimilation of wholes, or ordered contexts, to meaning. Experience can “stand for” itself—or be an “instance of itself,” or intrinsically meaningful, as Eugene Gendlin has perspicuously pointed out.³ Both Langer and Polanyi, in this sense, “push meaning down” while also recognizing that focusing on symbol systems—or forms of articulation—as objectively existing structures also “pushes meaning up.”

The problem that Langer, like Polanyi, confronted was what she called the “original segregation” of the continuum. Here she, too, like Polanyi relied on key findings of Gestalt psychology, especially the work of

Wolfgang Köhler. For her, this process of “cutting” or “drawing lines” in the sensory array is built into our perceptual apparatus, being, in fact, a biological property of our essentially embodied mind. Langer follows Ernst Cassirer in arguing that experiential wholes are, at the “lowest level,” essentially “expressive” or display a “physiognomic meaning,” an idea also developed by Polanyi in *The Tacit Dimension*. This often pragmatically oriented but always affectively tinged (that is, defined by attractions, aversions, and felt qualities) grasp of expressive or physiognomically defined wholes can be motivated by and embedded in even more articulated and symbolically informed contexts, which, so to speak, “name” them for us when we have ascended to the discursive level of sense-reading and sense-giving. Langer thinks that experience is permeated by or “presents itself as constituted by” qualitative features that are distinctive and immanent without being thematized—and that pull us toward them in a kind of fascination by significance.

But Langer goes further here: she contends that not only are experiential wholes intrinsically meaningful in themselves, but, as already mentioned, they also “stand for,” or can be taken to stand for, the features they display. That is, they are “natural symbols” that have a symbolic, but not discursive, function, even if they have a “representative” function in Polanyi’s sense of that term. A sensory image, or an experienced configuration in the perceptual field, is not just a complex sign of a thing which we have to deal with pragmatically, but a symbol, a *presentational symbol*, of this *type* of thing. Langer extends and applies here Cassirer’s notion of a “symbolic pregnancy” that is present in “thick” experiential forms and goes on to show how this is the root of the essential notion of a “life symbol.” Perceptual forms *exemplify* properties and features. Langer locates one of the crucial features of human mentality not just in this ability to “see significance” in the experiential continuum, which animals also do, but to use and extend the “seen significance.” The great life symbols that appear in the highest reaches of cultural life—fire, water, sun, desert, trees, oceans, starry heavens, and so forth—do not have a conventional or arbitrary meaning imposed on them but themselves, as ordered contexts, articulate a world of meanings, indeed, world-orientations, as the history of religions and of world myths clearly shows. But like Polanyi’s (and Peirce’s) notion that only an animal capable of explicit thought can recognize through self-reflection that its foundation is in the tacit or become aware of signs and symbols as such, for Langer, I think, only an animal that is through and through symbolically endowed in more than one dimension can “use” ordered wholes as themselves symbols, in this case presentational symbols. The “symbolic turn” for Langer refers to the singular ability of humans to “turn” experience itself into symbols, and symbolic forms, and not just react to physiognomic qualities by aversion or attraction or have their behavior steered by “practical” concerns, which is the case with other primates.

Langer adds to Polanyi’s notion of an existential meaning a more differentiated reference to the type of meanings that such Polanyian “ordered contexts” can have. There are vast aesthetic, even religious, implications here—as well as more straightforwardly epistemological implications. The key notion, which Polanyi had pointed out, is that ordered contexts, in themselves, do not have to bear, realistically or factually, upon anything outside of the context itself—*nor do they have to bear in the same way*. Abstract painting is a case in point: it exemplifies features without “naming” them or making them features of any discernible “object.” It is the same with music. When symbols are fused inextricably with what they mean we have Langer’s equivalent of Cassirer’s expressive level of meaning and, by extension, of mythic consciousness. There is no “distance” between symbol and object. While Langer, following Cassirer’s lead, will foreground the participation of the mythic symbol in its object, Polanyi will foreground our participation in the symbol. Ordered contexts that in the strict sense (or some sense) represent the world are clearly neither for Langer nor for Polanyi restricted to the discursive domain, which is a set of ordered contexts of a distinctive sort. Thus both painting and mathematical physics are “representative” in Polanyi’s sense, but Langer would see them as different symbolic modes with

different “logics” and representational powers. I think, therefore, that while Polanyi’s notion of two types of “ordered contexts” is not exactly equivalent to Langer’s pivotal distinction between presentational and discursive forms, they are nevertheless mutually reinforcing and intertwined—and they are equally fundamental, albeit different in their weightings.

Polanyi refuses to accept the automatism of the genesis of ordered contexts, or of the original qualitative segregation of the experiential plenum by a kind of “primordial attunement,” while Langer sees the segregating activity as arising from the types of bodies we have and from the neural development they have undergone, although this does not contravene her insistence on the supervening distinctively human activity of giving rise to explicitly symbolic meanings. In *Mind* Langer foregrounds the role of images in stabilizing the sensory flux, resulting in, or deriving from, an act of abstraction. Here she foregrounds the crucial distinction between generalizing and presentational abstraction, echoing the discursive /presentational contrast (see *M-I* 153-198). Langer further anticipates and confirms later work by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on image-schemata as operative, lived-through structures that underlie, and help to define, world-building.⁴ Langer goes beyond Polanyi, moreover, in pointing out other features of Gestalt theory that bear upon the generation and constitution of ordered contexts.

Paradigmatic Role of Art: On Gradients and the Logics of Indwelling

This turn to Gestalt theory is connected with Langer’s goal of charting the “morphology of feeling” and for the paradigmatic role of art in her construction of a model of mind. As she puts it, “all levels of feeling are reflected, explicitly or implicitly, in art” (*M-I* 208) and they reveal the “logic of sentience.” These levels are defined by “gradients”—and are not restricted to art but saturate all levels of sense-reading and sense-giving. “Gradients of all sorts—of relative clarity, complexity, tempo, intensity of feeling, interest, not to mention geometric gradations . . . permeate all artistic structure” (*M-I* 211). Langer then proposes that, quite generally, “sensations, like emotions, like living bodies, like articulated forms, have gradients of growth and development” (*M-I* 214), which she charts in great detail in the three volumes of *Mind*.

Gestalt theory’s further relevance to this notion of gradients is supported by the following phenomenologically rich passage from Wolfgang Köhler, which Langer cites:

Quite generally the inner processes, whether emotional or intellectual, show types of development which may be given names, usually applied to musical events, such as: *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, *accelerando* and *ritardando*. As these qualities occur in the world of acoustical experiences, they are found in the visual world too, and so they can express *similar* dynamic traits of inner life in directly observable activity. . . . To the increasing inner tempo and dynamical level there corresponds a *crescendo* and *accelerando* in visible movement. Of course, the same inner development may express itself acoustically, as in the *accelerando* and *reforzando* of speech. . . . Hesitation and lack of inner determination become visible . . . as *ritardando* of visible or audible behavior (*GP* 248; cited *PNK* 226).

Gradients and felt qualities, it is clear, spread over the whole field of awareness.

Polanyi for his part, no stranger to the philosophical implications of Gestalt theory,⁵ also develops the crucial notions of indwelling and embodiment, which can helpfully augment Langer’s thought. While Langer

parallels Peirce, Dewey, and Whitehead in speaking of qualitatively defined configurations, that is, configurations or ordered contexts with “distinctive feels,” Polanyi shows us the fateful implications of our perilous engagement with such configurations that exist as exosomatic semiotic tools. They can “bias” our access structures to the world by reason of their “probal nature”—a characterization that Polanyi also applies to language.⁶ As he writes in *The Tacit Dimension*, “we can . . . interpret the use of tools, of probes, and of pointers as further instances of the art of knowing, and may add to our list also the denotative use of language, as a kind of verbal pointing” (7). All probes open up a kind of “space,” depending on what they are meant to do. We *attend from* the probes while we attend to what they put us in contact with. This analogy of the indwelt probe, based on the from-to structures of awareness, is one of Polanyi’s most powerful working notions, although it is not restricted to him, as Merleau-Ponty has formulated a similar notion. It adds to Langer’s more objectively oriented analyses a description of what is existentially at stake when we commit ourselves to forms of articulation.

There is, in fact, a kind of way of thinking of art itself in probal terms. Polanyi bases his aesthetics, if we can take, at least up to a point, the treatment in *Meaning* at its face value, on the crucial distinction between *self-centered* and *self-giving* integrations, thematized in the semiotic mode as the distinction between *indication* and *symbolization*, which, it should be clear, is used in his work quite differently than in Langer’s. The spine of Langer’s semiotic schematization of meaning-making is the distinction between (a) a pragmatically conceived notion of indication, involving a grasp of real connections, unthematized resemblances, and a responding to “signals,” and (b) a notion of symbolization that takes both a presentational and a discursive form. Polanyi is concerned to draw attention to *our relation* to the way the sign-complex and “object meant” constellations are integrated to one another or to the way we are integrated to them, and not to the specific kind of work the various sign and symbol systems are trying to do. *Existential-semiotic relationship*, not logic of meaning, is at issue here. Transparency in contrast to density, pointing to in contrast to participating in, are the chief notions that Polanyi places at opposite poles to one another. Nevertheless, the “peculiar transparency” of language that Polanyi talks about has a “distinctive feel” that defines a kind of existential and semiotic embodiment, something Langer also confirms in her analysis of argumentative thinking. Such thinking has a distinctively phasal structure culminating in

the cadential feeling of solution, and the expansion of consciousness in new knowledge. If all these phases merge in one configured passage, the thought, however hard, is natural; and the height of discursive style is the embodiment of such a feeling pattern, modeled, word by word, on the progressing argument. The argument is the writer’s motif, and absolutely nothing else may enter in. As soon as he leads away from the motivating thought to (say) mystical or moral reaction, he is not supporting the process of understanding (*FF* 302).

But, clearly, *passing through* and *participating in* cannot be separated by a phenomenologically sharp dividing line. And the great achievement of “symbolization” in Polanyi’s use of the term is the *existential shift* that occurs in the creation of symbols in this sense of the term. Polanyi is surely right in his contention that we “pour ourselves” into these symbols and in this way undergo an existential shift, being caught up in a “play of meaning” that surpasses us. But Langer was concerned to delineate the “spaces” of these symbols primarily by her discussion of the “primary illusions” each art genre—or mythic, religious, or ritual frame—constructs. Here, I think, Langer and Polanyi are once again complementary, rather than merely talking past one another. Polanyi parallels the work of Paul Tillich in this respect, developed first and foremost to account for the nature of religious language, which Polanyi accepts, but now applied to the aesthetic domain of religious meaning. This domain is composed of samples from the sea of consciousness, or islands of meaning, emerging in the great plenum of

perplexity that marks our lives. The turn to the “presentational” is found here, demanded when “words fail.”

Langer, I have said, is not essentially concerned with a phenomenology of the relation of the perceiver to the meaning-bearer or sign-configuration but with the “logic” of meaning-bearing matter and the “objects” upon which it bears. Her approach is “objective,” as I see it, while Polanyi’s is “subjective” —or, in his terminology, “personal.” Polanyi is concerned with the “logic of consciousness” while Langer is concerned with the “semiotic logic” of a symbol that we nevertheless really do participate in. While self-giving integrations break the trajectories of transparency, presentational symbols break the trajectories and constraints of discursivity. But Polanyi is able to show us the *lived logic* of the great existential shifts attendant upon the development of presentationality. We are always intertwined with our semiotic systems, but presentationality induces and effects a very different type of event of meaning and *event of self-change*, without our falling into the trap of the fallacy of false contrasts. Still, Polanyi’s analysis of commitment and of persuasive passions, which are given a different, or differentiated, formulation here, is just as much at work in the realm of Langer’s discursive forms as in the realm of presentational forms—maybe even more at work when we foreground “meaning” more than “truth.”

I think, nevertheless, that Langer’s deeply grounded distinction between these two types of symbol systems, between saying and showing, is a major contribution and a kind of analytical ultimate. These two types define logically different forms of meaning-making and world-access structures. Langer follows Peirce’s lead here in determining the kind of objective “semiotic work” a symbol does. This work is oriented toward the object, not toward the subject or more broadly the interpreter, which Peirce assimilates to the “rhetorical side,” that is, the type of significant effects a sign, however understood, has upon the sign user. Langer is also concerned with the “syntactic” and “semantic” side of the symbol, its internal semiotic logic. This dimension, while not totally absent from Polanyi’s analysis, is not thematized in his work to the degree that we find in Langer. The internal differentiation of the constitution of discursive and presentational forms is not present in the same thematic way in Polanyi’s analysis, although Polanyi has a sober and well-grounded account of the conditions of a language system in his “articulation” chapter. These make up the equivalent of what Langer called the logic of a discursive form.

The Place of Language: Metaphor

With regard to language, the pivot of human forms of symbolization and articulation, both Langer and Polanyi think of language as fundamentally a means of articulation, of conceptualization. By emphasizing, without falsely separating, the conceptualization, rather than the communication, side of articulation, both Langer and Polanyi are forced to engage the universally relevant issue of the nature of metaphor as both the lived-through ground floor of concept formation and as the motor of semantic change. While it could be said when all is said and done that both Langer and Polanyi accept, in some sense, the “fusion” model of metaphor, what they share is a driving of the point of origin of metaphorical significance down “below language itself.” Metaphors are not just linguistic phenomena. They involve the grasp of the plurisignification of symbolically pregnant forms, that is, perceptual forms, the grasp of shared qualities—qualitative, “felt,” resemblances. The ability of perceptual Gestalts, in multiple modalities, to exemplify, and to force recognition of the exemplification of these shared qualities, is the focal point of Langer’s semiotic approach to metaphor. Langer thinks of metaphor as the law of growth of language, relying on Philipp Wegener’s analysis.⁷ Polanyi traces it to perceptual structures: integration of incompatibles that constitute an emergence of sense and meaning, as in perceptual integration or, more specifically, binocular vision. Langer roots metaphor in the symbolic nature of embodied perception itself: it exemplifies, or rather is defined by, the image-schematic structures that Lakoff and Johnson have emphasized

and prime symbols. And in this sense meaning is self-moving and self-weaving in a kind of spontaneous fashion, not being methodically generated and not being under our control. Polanyi clearly, following and transforming Max Black and thinking of the integration of incompatibles, speaks of the emergent quality of a metaphor, its non-reducibility to its “literal” foundations or components. It is a *semantic novelty* and also a *general model of emergence*. But a semantic emergence is something conceptual, not ontological, although it functions as a kind of non-substantialist model of an emergence. I am echoing Polanyi’s notion here of the distinction between an ontological and conceptual emergence.

Dwelling in and Breaking Out: Art, Religion, and the Limits of Articulation

Furthermore, the *attended from* subsidiary particulars, with their diverse meaning-functions within a formed whole, are very differently configured in the two types of Langerian symbols systems: the presentational and the discursive. As to a presentational form, exemplified in art, Langer writes: “A work of art is a single symbol, not a system of significant elements which may be variously compounded. Its elements have no symbolic values in isolation. They take their expressive character from their functions in the perceptual whole.”(M-I 84)

This passage clearly echoes the earlier one cited from Polanyi (PK 58). Looked at from the standpoint of pragmatist concerns, these syntactic features “qualify” our access to the world, mediated by the perceptual whole, and are themselves *indwelt*. Here is a further specification of the role of *gradients* in the realm of art, which inform our consciousness by the expressive character that *emerges* from the relational complex that is the presentational form. I think, as a result, that Polanyi can help us understand better the embodiment side of aesthetic indwelling, in particular, and presentational indwelling, in general, and the felt character of these complexly related gradients. Gradients as a field of attended-from subsidiaries *direct* and *inform* our indwelling. They help to “carry us away.”

When Polanyi speaks in *Personal Knowledge* of “breaking out” of a contemplative frame and encountering an ineffable reality, it seems to me that he is speaking not just of a religious-mystical vision or experience. Attempting to say the unutterable, or having one’s understanding or experience outrun one’s powers of articulation and formulation, as in the domain of sophistication, is itself a kind of knowing, an eminently tacit knowing experienced in the midst of the explicit. It is the *felt knowing of a limit*, maybe even a kind of negative knowing (a cloud of unknowing). Indeed, such experiences can be set up in maximally articulate frames that induce (by “spiritual reading,” for example, an exemplary form of religious practice) an attempt at understanding that shatters while giving us a kind of acquaintance with “ineffable realities” or “real presences.” Langer teaches us, with reference to Wittgenstein, that the ineffable does not have to be the irrational. It could be, indeed is, just another form of rationality, but not exercised in the discursive mode. Michael Sells’ book, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, charts this type of language as it is exemplified in the works of paradigmatic mystics.⁸ According to Sells, there is something in not just the paradoxical semantic content of the mystics’ utterances but in their syntactic configurations, which are “strange,” or, as Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, “deviant.” According to Langer, it is precisely the syntactic features of a presentational form that mark it off as essentially different from a discursive form, even if its material carrier is language. The presentational form is not language-like at all. It is not a strict formalism but an original Gestalt that is internally differentiated by all of its elements being combined in a relational whole. Langer delineates, with sophistication and acumen, the internal make-up of these objective structures. And, moreover, I think that she also allows us to see that *dwelling in* and *breaking out* are not really in strict opposition to one another. If, as Polanyi asserts, we can never fully say all that we know by reason of the tacit residue, this does not mean that we do not know it. And the experience of “breaking out” of an articulate

framework is itself situated within a horizon of meaning that gives us an experience of limits without specifying explicitly the limit, which is nevertheless “grasped” even as we are grasped by it. But this really shows that all articulation is finite in effect—even if it strives to be infinite. And, in the case of art works, we could say that the experience of ineffability does not lead to an inarticulate cry, as in mystical insights, but to the construction and interpretation of an articulate form that follows a very different kind of semiotic logic. Art, in fact, gives us a means of “breaking out” of the discursive frame of language even if it is the product of the language animal par excellence. Its “vision” belongs to, and is enabled by, another frame.

Speaking of symbolization and self-giving integrations, Polanyi says that we are not only embodied in the artwork in the way we are embodied in a probe but that we “pour ourselves” into the artwork (or ritual, or mythic symbol, as the case may be) so that it embodies us in all the movements and nuances of our consciousness. It integrates us (or objectifies our disintegration) in the very process of symbolic embodiment, thus giving all the dimensions of our existence and flexions of consciousness a symbolic form. This is one of the reasons that we are “touched” by works of art—and prime symbols—and see ourselves in them. Langer specifies more clearly the details of the elements that are integrated into the embodied and indwelt symbol—which is also a symbol of embodiment—while Polanyi specifies the conscious logic of such an embodiment.

An artwork engages us often and even predominantly without our explicit control. This is one of the most essential lessons of Polanyi’s schematization of our cognitional situation. This is, in fact, an aesthetic aspect of the phenomenon of subception—as well as the tacit nature of all the “transactions” integrating self with world. We are affected by clues and cues without our conscious advertence and this “being affected” is a kind of meaning and a form of interpretation. An art work, for Langer, is a form of feeling or a formed feeling. Polanyi tells us, in a certain sense, what to look for and how to look and where to look, in the vast field of subsidiaries functioning as vectors, but not what we will find. Langer tells us what we will find, objective forms made up of perceived gradients that constitute a realm of primary illusions, but not where we will find it. We will find them, if we follow Polanyi, in all those “from structures” that define *the particulars and their gradients* that we both integrate and are *integrated into*. Langer gives us a semiotic phenomenology of these structures. Polanyi gives us a schematization of our semiotic relation to these structures. This is another instance of where we are not, I think, forced to make a sharp contrast between Langer and Polanyi. Just as in the case of artworks, dwelling in and breaking out are really not opposed, so self-centered and self-giving integrations are not opposed, but intimately connected. It is the weighting and the gradation that must be taken into consideration.

Emergence and Novelty: Mind in Origin and in Action

Another point of intersection is the analysis of emergence and of novelty. Both Langer and Polanyi oppose simplistic monism and radical reductionism. They acknowledge a kind of *nisus* toward complexity and “higher orders,” defined in terms of complexity. Such a *nisus* is immanent, not imposed from without nor in any clearly empirical sense foreordained, even if Polanyi thinks it is possibly “elicited” by a “cosmic field” one could call “God.” But their motivations were different and Langer went so far as to call herself a “sober naturalist.” Indeed, we must see her whole project as a form of semiotic naturalism. The symbolic animal is a thoroughly natural being, arising in nature through natural processes and not endowed with any “supernatural” trappings. But this does not make Langer a “materialist” in any simple sense of that term. While she opposes vitalism and an intrinsic, or inevitable, teleology, at the same time she affirms that with the arrival of “feeling” in the human sense, with its symbolic torquing of experience, we have a transition to *mind, sensu stricto*. This has no parallel in the rest of the animal kingdom, as Polanyi also asserts by insisting on the *combinatory ability*, and the self-reflexivity

attendant upon it, of humans as opposed to the other animals. “Feeling,” as Langer uses the term, arises as the psychic phase of organic processes, but she takes great pains to chart the emergence of mind in the human sense as dependent upon the ability to operate symbolically. Indeed, mind is an achievement of semiosis as a kind of cosmic event. Mind is, in fact, extended and embodied in externally existing systems of signs, which make up its matrix, too.

Langer, while not a process philosopher in any technical sense of the term, does not think of the mind as a “substance.” It is a moving relational complex, a self-assembling but not “substantial” whole, that is essentially self-interpreting. It arises as a purely natural phenomenon. It is the “place” or “topos” of meaning. It is relational complexes, made up of acts, that show all types of distinctive features and qualities that are phenomenologically accessible at all levels of reality. This is the great theme of *Mind*. While relations are the key to Langer’s work both in semiotics and the philosophy of mind, Polanyi, once again, helps us see how relations are apprehended: a whole is an ordered context. And higher orders of contexts, and orders of orders, arise through and in relations and patterns of relations. A whole, grasped within the from-to structure of awareness, is a pattern of related, or integrated, elements. Patterns and elements are apprehended together within this twofold structure. We could ask, in light of this, whether for Polanyi, too, the mind is to be so thought of in this way? Is it not a self-assembling process of reflectively recursive integrations of both self and other, rooted in the ever present background of a tacitly integrated and indwelt body? Is this not a position very close to William James’s analysis of the stream of consciousness?

Polanyi starts with perception and arrives at meaning. Langer starts with meaning and arrives at perception. But Polanyi’s schema of the tacit triad and the indispensable reformulation of the parts-whole relation allow him to have a model of emergence that does not involve any break with a broadly conceived natural order or the imposition of new levels and realities “from the outside.” Is it possible, one might ask, to interpret Polanyi’s account of emergence in semiotic terms, that is, that what we encounter are emergent levels of complexity and meaning? The principle of marginal control is key here. Langer, I think, does not have an equivalent, but it allows Polanyi to talk perhaps more precisely about just how different levels of reality can emerge without any *deus ex machina* intervention. Neural activity is essential to thinking, but thinking, indeed, the various forms of sentience, is an emergent property of the *relations* between neural events. A new phenomenal property as well as a new type of activity arises on this neural basis. So, having a distinctively human body is a condition for the “emergence” of mind. If we take seriously Polanyi’s account of how to conceptualize the so-called “mind-body” issue, with the distinctiveness of the from-pole, which includes our body, then he has shown us how the state of the body appears as the *meaning* of the appearing world. That is, Polanyi formulates the relation between the body and the emergent field of consciousness in light of his model of tacit knowing, without speculating, on just “how” consciousness or sentience arises from a properly structured body. It is a phenomenal fact and a field for rich and thick descriptions.

The Genetic and the Semiotic

Going a bit further, we could say that Langer tries to develop in *Mind* a genetic and semiotic account of the rise of mind—especially the human mind—while Polanyi tries to uncover the “logic” of the relationship between mind and its somatic underpinnings. Langer uses the analogy of the glowing wire to talk about feeling as the “change of state” of a physical system when it crosses the threshold to sentience or feeling. Consciousness or sentience becomes the *felt meaning of the body*. It integrates the body (and concomitantly the world) into a meaningful unity, albeit on different levels depending on the types of consciousness we are concerned with—

and the types of bodies involved. And the body then becomes the enabling condition for our awareness of the world, the ultimate “instrument” for world-building. But it is not something that we can take up and put down at will. There is furthermore a parallel between the “body” of consciousness and the “body” of signs in which we dwell. Indeed, when Polanyi distinguishes in *The Tacit Dimension* a “semantic aspect” of tacit knowing, that is, that tacit knowing creates *meaning* by indwelling sets of clues and integrating them into coherences, he is in fundamental agreement with Langer’s deepest insights. But Langer charts in more detail the semiotic phenomenology of the origin of meaning. In this her concerns are perhaps more genetic, while sharing with Polanyi a “generative” concern, if I may be so bold as to make such a distinction.

Pushing Meaning Up and Down: Verifying and Validating

Langer and Polanyi most importantly intersect with their concern to “push meaning down” to a primary stratum “prior” to taking on the epistemological or critical attitude. They show that the grasp of meaning is an “event” in which we are caught up, not something that we first and foremost “do.” But, nevertheless, it is something that we do in the sense that it engages us in feats of interpretation and integration. There is a delicate tension between spontaneity and deliberate action, for, on both Langer’s and Polanyi’s account, meaning in all its forms wells up and envelops us, “carrying us away.” “Pushing meaning up” is an achievement that is framed in intersecting, but not identical, ways. Langer’s approach is semiotic and involves a thematization of the logic of formed content, which makes up a kind of “cultural hermeneutics.” Polanyi’s approach took on a more explicitly semiotic cast later in his work with his pivotal distinction between indication and symbolization and the parallel notion of self-centered and self-giving integrations, exploited in *Meaning*. I would say that the singular power of presentational symbolization in all its modes is that it exemplifies our self-giving to realms that defy discourse, presenting us with “occasions of experiencing” that “articulate” a total self-disposition of acknowledgement and acceptance. While Langer and Polanyi apparently differ on the material side of validity of these systems of life symbols, they complement one another in terms of developing the formal frames within which they are encountered and interpreted.

In this respect, I think that the distinction between *verification* and *validation* needs to be explored in great detail. Validation, on Polanyi’s reckoning, involves a fuller participation in the frame, a deeper sense of embodiment and indwelling, a greater delicacy and skill in identifying the features and aspects of subjectivity that are objectified in the life symbols. There is a need for *existential skills* and not just objectively oriented cognitive skills in the sense that we are “disposing” of ourselves by participation rather than construing the world “objectively” by indication and a consequent verification. But it is crucial not to put these two forms of cognitive and existential commitments into any irreconcilable relation. They are weightings and emphases, not strict alternatives. Langer emphasizes the *semiotic depth* of these prime symbols that elicit from us such deep participation, while Polanyi charts the existential depth of the logic of commitment.

Polanyi’s notion of indwelling is, I think, an extraordinarily powerful notion, perhaps with more evocative, rather than analytical, power than embodiment, to which it is cognate and with which it shares many supporting examples. It is our polymodal body in which we dwell. Polanyi never strays from his recognition of the centrality of body consciousness as a paradigm of non-objective awareness. The body, both endosomatic and exosomatic, is both the source of, and placed within, a “field” of awareness, but it is as source the “zero point” of the coordinates of all “objective givens” and as placed within these coordinates it is spread out over the whole cultural field. The whole body can never be completely given as an object, although we have a fundamental feeling of its differentiated “tonus” as a kind of affective Gestalt. It is the way the world feels. Langer foregrounds this

phenomenon of a somatic tonus in key sections of *Mind*. Polanyi has powerfully shown that dwelling in the body has a distinctive feel and as the body is extended out into sets of exosomatic instruments its feeling structures change, as I have argued in *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense*. Each type of exosomatic instrument functions as a kind of tentacle by means of which we touch the world—and the world touches us. John Dewey wrote memorably about this in his *Art as Experience*. Our exosomatic body, the realm of objectified forms, or Hegel’s objective spirit, not only belongs to us; we belong to it. Our indwelling introduces distinctive biases in our body-feeling, generating different “feels” attendant upon their functioning as access structures to the world and to ourselves. I think that this notion of a distinctive feel applies most fruitfully to sign and symbol systems—and to theories of signs and symbol systems. These systems also have objective, “bodily,” being. Just as a wooden probe has a different feel from a cast iron one, so different semiotic—and philosophical—systems have different feels.

In conclusion, Langer’s and Polanyi’s intellectual projects should themselves be seen as probes with different conceptual feels. They are fundamentally probes we have to learn to use, that is, *validate* and not just theoretically *verify*, in order to open up the space of meaning-making that we ourselves are.

Endnotes

¹I have treated Susanne Langer’s work as a whole in my *Susanne Langer in Focus: The Symbolic Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). It furnishes the background for the admittedly brief and schematic comments here, with a number of references to parallels with Polanyi. I have treated Polanyi’s work in a number of different contexts and formats, but perhaps the most mature and fundamental discussions are to be found in chapter 2, “The Tacit Logic of Consciousness: From Perception to Art,” in my *Consciousness and the Play of Signs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) and in chapter 1, “On the Perceptual Roots of Linguistic Meaning,” and chapter 4, “Technics and the Bias of Perception: The Tacit Logic of Embodied Meanings,” in my *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense: Language, Perception, Technics* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002).

In addition to the usual abbreviations for Polanyi’s works, the following abbreviations will be used in the text:

FF Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953).

GP Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* (New York: H. Liveright, 1947).

M-I Susanne Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Vol 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

PNK Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942; 2nd ed., with new preface by the author, 1951; 3rd edition with new preface by the author, 1957).

²Langer’s first distinction is for all intents and purposes identical with Terrence Deacon’s Peirce-inspired positioning of the “cut” in semiotic levels that mark the rise of the “symbolic species.” Of course, prior semiotic levels are themselves transformed when subsumed up into a symbolic matrix, in the strict sense of that term, as Peirce so clearly showed. See Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species* (New York: Norton, 1997).

³Eugene Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997; originally published in 1962 by The Free Press of Glencoe).

⁴See especially George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, with a new afterword (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁵See my “Tacit Knowing, Gestalt Theory, and the Model of Perceptual Consciousness,” *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, vol. 27 (1992): pp. 23-43.

⁶I have, as indicated in note 1, explored this theme in some detail, with explicit reliance on Polanyian analytical tools, in two chapters, “On the Perceptual Roots of Linguistic Meaning” and “Technics and the Bias of Perception: The Tacit Logic of Embodied Meanings,” in my *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense: Language, Perception, Technics* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002).

⁷See my *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense*, pp. 88-98 for a discussion of Wegener’s work in light of the approaches to language of Karl Bühler and Alan Gardiner, upon both of whom Polanyi relied for his own treatment of language, as noted in the chapter on articulation in *Personal Knowledge*.

⁸(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). The introduction and epilogue give a compact and extremely provocative schematization of the issues only gestured at here. See also my “Language and the Thresholds of Sense: Some Aspects of the Failure of Words,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 22/2: pp. 106-117.

Notes on Contributors

Vincent Colapietro (vx5@psu.edu) is Liberal Arts Research Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University (University Park Campus). American pragmatism is one of his main areas of historical specialization, while questions concerning agency, subjectivity, mind, and consciousness are among his focal systematic concerns. He has been exploring the writings of both Susanne K. Langer and Michael Polanyi since first encountering them as a graduate student. They are among the principal theorists upon whom he draws in his ongoing efforts to formulate an anti-reductivist naturalistic account of the distinctive activities of the human animal.

Walter B. Gulick (WGulick@msubillings.edu), Professor Emeritus at Montana State University, Billings, is a frequent contributor to *TAD*. He was for several years the President of the Polanyi Society and for many years has been involved in organizing Society programs, including the 2008 APA program for which most of the essays in this issue were written. For almost twenty years, Gulick has been the Book Review Editor for *TAD*.

Robert E. Innis (Robert_Innis@uml.edu) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Two of his books, *Consciousness and the Play of Signs* (Indiana University Press, 1994), *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense: Language, Perception, Technics* (Penn State University Press, 2002), were reviewed in *TAD*; his most recent book is *Susanne Langer in Focus: The Symbolic Mind* (Indiana University Press, 2009). His interests encompass aesthetics, comparative theories of knowledge, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of religion.

Charles Lowney (CWL2@wlu.edu) is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Washington and Lee University in Virginia. He received his Ph.D. from Boston University and his MA from Boston College. His work is primarily on the limits of understanding and expression in the analytic tradition and on moral epistemology. Lowney studied Polanyi’s philosophy with the late Avery Dulles as an undergraduate at BC and it has influenced his work ever since. Lowney first wrote on Polanyi for *TAD* in 1999 (“Wittgenstein and Polanyi: Metaphysics Reconsidered,” 26:1, 1999-2000). More recent articles involving Polanyi include “Saying, Seeing and Being the Gestalt” (*Appraisal*, 7:1, 2008), “Authenticity and the Reconciliation of Modernity” (*Pluralist*, 4:1, 2009) and “The Tacit in Frege” (forthcoming in *Polanyiana*).

Phil Mullins (mullins@missouriwestern.edu), the *TAD* Editor since 1991, is Professor Emeritus at Missouri Western State University. He has been interested in Marjorie Grene’s work with Polanyi and her philosophical ideas since he first encountered her as a graduate student in the early seventies. He wrote a *TAD* review article on Grene’s 1995 book, *A Philosophical Testament*, as well as an essay on Grene and Polanyi for *The Philosophy of Marjorie Grene*, the 2002 Library of Living Philosophers volume on Grene’s thought.