

# William H. Poteat: A Laudatio

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Key Words: mindbody, speech, acquisition of language, Descartes, Heidegger, ground, meaning

*William H. Poteat's thought, while indebted to Michael Polanyi, originates in Poteat's own project of remembering all articulate significances to their pre-articulate grounding in the mindbody. He invented the term mindbody both to overstep the traditional distinction between mind and body and to name the living arche of all meaning and meaning-discernment. In focusing on the recovery of the mindbody as the bedrock ontological matrix for the acquisition of speech, the act of explicit reference par excellence, Poteat radicalizes and advances Polanyi's efforts to reclaim the tacit roots of all explicit knowledge.*

## I

Let me offer an apology. There are many former and present students of Bill Poteat who could and should be writing this piece, and write it better than I. It is Jim Stines who must bear the brunt of being the initiator of all this, since it was he who asked me to write a short essay on "The Thought of William H. Poteat." I have always had the highest regard for Jim, thinking him to be both mensch and sage. Now I see he is merely mensch. Being incapable of saying no to anyone, especially to the likes of Jim, I agreed to the folly and cursed my fate, as well as Jim. What follows, though, cannot satisfy Jim's request. There is no one better to write on the thought of William Poteat than Poteat himself, and his writings are available.<sup>1</sup>

What I have set for myself is a less pretentious task; namely, to speak of what the man and his thinking has opened up for me. It is told that in the 17th century, a Caroline divine wrote a book in which he named the day and hour of the impending end of the world. The day came and went. Life went on. The divine then wrote a second book in which he announced that the world has indeed come to an end, but no one had noticed.

There is surrounding the work of Poteat, at times penetrating into the actual arguments themselves, the knowledge that we live in dark times, times in which the ligaments which hold us, and the world we inhabit, have come apart, leaving each of us alone, suffering our disintegration as idiots. Indeed the spiritual condition of contemporary society is one of unrelieved idiocy, both in the sense of lives lived in terrible isolation and in the sense of a sophisticated and willed stupidity. The stupidity has to do with the oppressive dominance over our imaginations of ways of conceiving ourselves which make it impossible for us in those conceptions to think from the fact that we are in the world with others. These conceptions are connected to the problematic to which Polanyi addressed himself; and which, generally, can be said to be the systematic exclusion from reflection's landscape of any tacit grounding of explicit attention. Thinking under these conditions inevitably produces a view of ourselves in which we are absent from any indwelt surround.

Poteat's intellectual passion is directed toward reconceiving ourselves in the world in ways which describe our actual performances of knowing and doing which resist the turn away from our prearticulate reliance upon the tacit for all articulate and explicit notifications we make. His sense is that without attention to the prearticulate forming powers of our living bodies in an environ which holds us through the root of our living depths, sooner or later our explicit powers will lose their traction in the world, and we will float in the abstractions of a disembodied intellect, hovering over the "world" each at best could only construct for her knowing. Even here,

though, the ability to construct such a mental landscape out of (what is assumed to be) the chaos of sensations is taken to be itself lucid to the constructor, and hence no intrinsic participation of the knower in the world is possible. There is nothing outside the constructing intellect in which a knower could participate. Moreover, since the construction is private to the “transcendental unity of apperception” and lucid thereto, the constructor is not, nor can be, a participant in any public community of knowers. All knowledge is construction, private and idiotic.

All this is familiar ground to Polanyians. What does Poteat offer which is not so familiar, indeed is radically unfamiliar, to those of us who know Polanyi?

Poteat takes the tacit/explicit, from/to, subsidiary/focal polarity which is the core of Polanyi’s thinking and radicalizes it so as to ground the polarity in a depth of living intelligence which Poteat calls “The Mindbody.” This radix of all feats of knowing and doing Poteat takes to be implicit in Polanyi’s work but never directly (or as directly as can be) explored. In fact, Poteat’s investigations of a post-critical logic is only occasioned by Polanyi. Poteat supplies Polanyi’s work with its radical ontological source. “Polanyian Meditations” may be a misnomer. Poteat’s imagination found its ally in Polanyi, but not its originator. The subtitle of the book, “In Search of a Post-Critical Logic” seems more appropriate to its contents. Polanyi seems a distant background to Poteat’s rummaging into the living and ordering ground in which we are thoroughly concreted, in which we are, the non-existence of which is impossible to conceive.

So, in order to encounter Poteat one must put aside the expectation that he is yet another commentator upon and apologist for Michael Polanyi. Indebted as he is to the man, Poteat’s work is uniquely his own. The question becomes, what is it that Poteat does in his metanoia backwards and downwards within our intelligent feats, trying to glimpse the chiasmus where intelligence is born? He expends strenuous effort in trying to remain faithful to the chiasmus, to remain within its mysterious movements so that as he writes he will not abstract his words from their flesh. His writing is therefore convoluted, looped back upon itself as he digs his way backwards even as he moves forward. To read him is exhausting. His writing must have drained him terribly. His repetitions, relentless stalking, etymological digs, and (for me) words as unfamiliar as the far side of the moon (once was)-words, by the way, when looked up in a dictionary, seem absolutely appropriate once understood!--requires of the reader that s/he follows in herself the same labyrinth he leads into, a labyrinth wondrous and graceful as well as difficult and slippery.

Before going further into what Poteat does in his return to the source, I think it is important to separate him from two other thinkers who are (at least in modernity) the two who stand out in a similar quest--one at the beginning and the other (it is said) at the end--Descartes and Heidegger.

Descartes’ source (the cogito) is of course the very opposite of Poteat’s goal. A disembodied mind in a dispirited object is hardly what Poteat’s legacy from Polanyi would call forth. In fact such angelistic mechanism lies at the source of our modern post-apocalypse and contemporary faithlessness. Poteat’s thinking is not such a thorough going rebellion against what is on hand as is Descartes’!

As for Heidegger, Poteat is to be distinguished from him in two ways. One, Poteat does not think of himself as the prophet of Being, presiding over the appearance of Being as its custodian in terms of Being’s be-ing of itself, first from out of the production metaphysics of Greek thought, throughout Being’s enslavement to that metaphysic until the crisis of 20th Century nihilism, occasioning the birth of the “letting-be” of Being and the clearing, spread before us of the “letting-be,” in which we recover our thinking in opened thanking.(!) Poteat is no mystagogue. Two, Heidegger’s vista is always “out there” in the Being which beings itself. His disclaimers concerning humanism, i.e., that he is not one nor is his thinking thinking about the human condition, is both quite obvious to all who read him and is also his modernity. Modernity is a project against the human, a project

to escape the conditions of sensuous perception, of temporally constituted conception, of morally upheld conventions of discourse and action, in order to “think Being” from a transhuman perspective.

Poteat is, to say the least, a human thinker. His source lies close to us, is everywhere present to and in us. His radicalizing of Polanyi does not erase the personal, it searches for our roots.

So, if Descartes’ source requires inward withdrawal from the world, Poteat’s requires downward recovery of our presence in the world; and if Heidegger’s source requires the dissolving of the human into the Be-ing of Being, Poteat’s requires the establishment of the human in our lively mindbodily rootedness in what is.

## II

What is Poteat’s source, and how do we follow his lead in grasping it? It is necessary to say two things at once here. One is that the ground Poteat is recovering is not one which is somewhere other than where we are always. Our grasp of it is possible because of its grasp of us, its being the reflexive force of enabling us to grasp. It cannot be lost. But despite that, it can be (is) eclipsed, covered over, by an attitude and an imagination that wills itself to be dependent upon nothing other than its own lucid markings and which dreams of a freedom of expression in which that expression is boundless. In such case, the ground is lost; lost, that is to say, to awareness, to reflection. The irony is such a loss is possible only because the ground forever thrusts us into expression (and hence, away from its being an item in our expression) and we become captured in the narcissistic fetishism of our expressions, forgetting and being faithless to that which gives us to ourselves.

Having said that, the theme in Poteat’s work<sup>2</sup> which I wish to remark is expression, and more specifically, that expression which is speech.<sup>3</sup> Even more specifically that speech which is bodied forth as well as sounded forth.

By being bodied forth, consider the following example which, I think, says much about what Poteat wishes to grasp about speech which is not sounded, and about certain implications which such silent saying has.

I had the occasion, some years ago, to watch my daughter-in-law feed my infant grandson. As she moved the spoon to him and as he opened his mouth to receive the food, she also opened hers. This seemed odd to me, so without remarking it, I observed further movements. Every time she moved the spoon to him, she opened her mouth in synch with him. What was going on here?

There is one thing I know was not going on there, although it is in fact what I am usually told by my students whose imaginations are so thoroughly captured by the force of lucidity and its attendant domination-ideology in which each of us is in control of every conceivable happening, in control that is, if we are educated into lucid techne; namely, that my daughter-in-law was teaching my grandson to eat! That is the only way my students can make sense of what was happening. (I resist the temptation to analyze further that misreading of the situation, because it expresses a horrible, but accurate, declaration of our present idiotic desperation and macrocephalic terror.) One has to be taught to eat? To breathe? To grasp? To dance? To walk? To speak?

It is probably true that one learns to do all of these things. But does one ever have a teacher in that learning? And what is it to learn but to have no teacher?

It can only mean that our lives are such that accompanying the acquisition of our skills and our understandings transactions are going on in which forms are being engendered in mute reflexivity where we are in deepest intercourse with the world; an intercourse as ordinary as our own bodies, and as mysterious as the lively silence from which we come, which surrounds and penetrates our speaking, and in which our speech finds its birth.

My daughter-in-law is in the same world as my grandson. Her deepest lively place therein is tentacled to my grandson’s deepest lively place therein. When he moves, even if only in her natural anticipation, so does she. They move together, woven into a pre-verbal (but not pre-linguistic) warp in which movements have their

semantic weight and somatic spark. Truth be known, something of the same kind of danced discourse was happening to me as I observed(!) the scene. My stomach muscles tightened in anticipation, my saliva came forth, my jaw seemed to want to open. But, then, this kind of intercourse occurs for us all, and continuously, in all our transactions. We cringe when we see two cars about to collide. We turn away when someone moves to scratch her fingernails down the blackboard. We put the fork into our mouth, not into our cheek. We follow an argument. We understand a person. And all of these things (and quite literally everything else) emerge from the same danced discourse in which my daughter-in-law was engaged with her son.

There is an additional fact in all this that is telling. When I asked my daughter-in-law why she was opening her mouth while feeding her son, she denied doing it, thinking me to be kidding her. Only with the corroborating evidence of my son did she, in puzzling recognition where I thought I saw the dear look of Mother Eve after she ate of the tree of knowledge and thus was moved by the wonder of dawning wisdom, (never mind the Biblical story), say “Did I really do that?” And then we all laughed, nodding in joyful wisdom (What in fact the Biblical story should have declared. Yahweh was too uptight, or have I overlooked the dark side of the acquisition of wisdom?).

### III

Potat’s mind is concentrated, rivetted one might say, at this intersection of the living body’s conceiving of the mind, an intersection he calls, “mindbody,” thereby bringing together at the radix the forms of knowing and doing of explicit markings with the intelligence of our bodies. He wants to focus us upon that place where we live and where our consciousness is prefigured. This place and this focus becomes the radix from which all else in his recent thinking moves, always seeking to recover itself from its temptation to forget its grounding while it pursues its reconfigurations of traditional philosophical problems from that ground’s authorizing lead.

He shows how captured we are by notions of sense and truth which are static, visual, and “explained” (flat), so deeply are we caught in the triple-squeeze of Platonism/Cartesianism/Literacy in our cultural heritage. Being so, we pass over motility, tone, tension, dynamic form (to mention only the most obvious) as these rely upon their parentage in the mindbody, seeking to reduce all that is deep and living in us to that which is visually surfaced, sui generis, and emptied of life. When we have succeeded (which is impossible) in doing that, (so the fantasy runs) then we imagine we can think and be rational. This theme is close to Potat’s intellectual center of gravity. The elimination of forming powers from the living body which is the ground of each and all of us is the theme running through his work, going all the way back to his Ph.D. dissertation on Pascal subtitled, “The Exteriorization of Sensibility.” He is after the pre-articulate language of the body. His word is Mindbody. His is an exploration of the “assumptions our muscles make”, the logic of ligaments, the language of the pre-articulate.

### IV

I think it is important at this point to quote Potat himself and what Potat quotes, at some length, concerning this matter of pre-articulate logic and the lively conversation the mindbody has with its surround.

He writes, concerning the acquisition of language by infants and what this acquisition means:

...if there were not in the very shape and rhythm of our preverbal mindbodily existence this primitive and tacit sense of form, whole, and meaning, there could never be for us in our verbalized, mindbodily existence a reality upon which the concepts ‘form,’ ‘whole,’ or ‘meaning’ might come to bear. Joseph Church has said all of this with such straightforward ingenuousness that its profound import may easily be overlooked. He says:

We assume, that words are not simple abstract forms that impinge upon [the

language-acquiring child] from without, but that they reverberate in him and arouse him to at least partial mobilization.... We cannot understand how language gets from outside the child to inside unless it is in some way inside from the beginning; we cannot understand how passive language becomes active language unless it is always to some extent active.

It is of some considerable interest that recent empirical studies of language learning among human infants support these conclusions--though, let it be remembered, these investigators could have generated the hypothesis that the form of the patterned sound of human speech and the form of the motility of preverbal human infants are connatural with one another only by relying upon a more primitive intuition from within their mindbodies of the consanguinity of their own motility and sentience, their own speaking/hearing, and their own sense of meaning.

Roger Lewin, editor of Child Alive, says in his introduction:

The development of social interaction--through touching, breast-feeding, and eye-to-eye contact--begins at birth. The newborn baby displays inbuilt rhythms--in dreaming and sucking behavior for instance--and these soon expand into direct social contact through visual and vocal signaling. The inbuilt rhythms are prelude to intentional and deliberate signaling by the baby.

In "Early Attempts at Speech," from which I shall quote extensively, Colwyn Trevarthen says:

A discovery of major importance is that the basic pacemakers of attending and intending movements in infants operate at frequencies in time that are the same as adults.... As the person approaches the infant... then all the emanations from this approach have rhythmical properties that are comparable with those inside the movement-generating mechanism of the infant's brain. From this correspondence I believe the infant builds a bridge to persons.

Trevarthen, with Penelope Hubble and Lynn Murray, has made films at Edinburgh that reveal that

the acts of two-month-olds responding to attentions of elder persons outline many psychological processes of talking between adults. We have found activity which is best called "prespeech" because both the context in which it occurs and its form indicate that it is a rudimentary form of speaking by movements of lips and tongue... We note a specific pattern of breathing with prespeech even when sounds are not made.... Also associated with prespeech are distinctive 'hand-waving' movements that are developmentally related to the gestures or gesticulations of adults in "eager" and "graphic" conversation.

Most striking of all, perhaps, Trevarthen suggests that

changes that all unaffected mothers make to slower, more emphatic but gentle movements and to “baby talk” may come from a return of the mother to more elementary or basic components in her innate repertoire of social arts.

Of course! We are able to talk to babies because our own babyhood (pace, Descartes) is always contemporaneously with us! Again, it is embarrassing to have to make much of this point in philosophical argument, since we all know it quite well.

Finally, in an essay, “Speech Makes Babies Move,” William Condon concludes:

that the neonate moves synchronously with adult speech as early as the first day after birth.

Having worked out a device for relating units of body motion to units of speech in experiments with film, Condon was able to observe that

microanalysis led me to the startling observation...that a listener moves synchronously with a speaker during interaction. This is usually a completely “unconscious” reaction. It seems to be a form of precise and almost simultaneous entrainment on the part of the listener in relation to the emergent articulatory patterning of the speaker’s speech.

Later he says:

There is an ongoing isomorphism or entrainment between the listener’s process units and the speakers speech. It is like an intricate and subtle dance which is always occurring during interactions.<sup>4</sup>

## V

This phenomenon of the lively exchange and mutual rhythm of speech and its acquisition is, of course, carried forward throughout our lives and is the context of all speech in all of its different modes and deployments. Moving in, through, under, around, and above speakers is this lively web of action and meaning.

When one is attentive to the primacy of speaking words for the writing of them in the enactment of language and in its acquisition, the thickness of this lively web connecting us to the world of significances and to the world of signifiers becomes so apparent that one wonders how anyone could be blind to it. But being blind to it is exactly what an imagination in servitude to literacy effects. Here the lively web of interchange is exchanged for a flat and static plane of unraveled signifiers, loose significances, and dubious referentiality which supplants the conversation and substitutes a lifeless silence filled with visual markings, markings which lack traction anywhere.

Poteat's claim is that our intellectual powers are (and have been for sometime) enthralled by the visual to the extent that when we put conceptual issues to ourselves we put them into a map, a visual field of referential signifiers in search of a referent, and lose the lively intercourse in which literacy itself is set and due to which meanings are generated. To recover this lively web of the dance of speech as the orational source of reason would turn the tables on the totalitarianism of the literate imagination. The doing of that would intellectually return us to ourselves, a place we have never left anyway, although some of us have less of a solid foothold there than others. Solid or not, though, it is our only ground. Without this ground, the Caroline divine was correct: the world has come to an end and no one has noticed!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985); *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990); Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (eds.), *Intellect and Hope: Essays in The Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968); as well as a forthcoming collection (University of Missouri Press), edited by James Nichol and James Stines, of Poteat's earlier and more critical essays, for which he is justly famous, including inter alia, "I Will Die; An Analysis" and "God and The Private I." In the Nichol and Stines' collection is a complete bibliography of Poteat's writings.

<sup>2</sup> His work, while concentrated, deals with many themes. I am taking only one to represent the general force and substance of his thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Poteat deals with speech in many ways and terms; eg, orality and literacy, la parole and la langue, music, silence, and a host of other expressive acts such as how one's body incarnates meaning in posture, in movement, in deflated or inflated chest cavity, etc. The richness of expression and of speech and language in Poteat's work should not be confused with my pedestrian remarks following.

<sup>4</sup> *Polanyian Meditations*, 194-196.