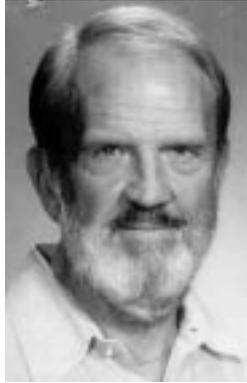


Remembering Bill Poteat¹

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William Hardman Poteat

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This brief essay remembers the late William H. Poteat and outlines his intellectual perspective and its roots.

It has been just over a year now since Bill Poteat died. Many in the Polanyi Society were Bill's students, including me. Others members knew him by virtue of having read his book *Polanyian Meditations*. Some are even of the opinion that there is a sort of "Poteasian" school of Polanyi interpretation. I doubt this. But I don't doubt Bill's influence in Polanyi studies, or that his influence is still a rather substantial force within the Polanyi Society. Given these facts, there is reason to think that *TAD* readers would be interested in knowing more about Bill's intellectual perspective. I offer the following sketch of that perspective—from my own perspective of course—in the hope that it will be a fitting tribute to him on the anniversary of his death and in the hope that it may shed light on why Bill was, as we all are, so attracted to and so indebted to Polanyi's work.

Many years ago when I was a senior undergraduate philosophy major wondering what to do next: Will I go to graduate school, or divinity school, or—horrible thought—get a job? I came across, quite by chance a copy of *The Duke Divinity School Review*. Inside, I found an article entitled "Anxiety, Courage and Truth," by one William H. Poteat (Autumn, 1966). The article was a printed version of a sermon that he had presented to the Divinity School Chapel. I was stunned.

The article knocked me off my horse—for a little while at least. As a philosophy major, I was Platonist enough to be convinced that knowledge was power and freedom, and nothing other but positive; Plato had me convinced that it was ignorance that was the source of all of our ills. It turns out that I must also have

been Christian enough to recognize the wisdom of Bill's outrageous claim to the contrary: coming to terms with truth, he was arguing, and urging, is a deeply equivocal process.

This is especially so when it comes to coming to terms with the truth about ourselves, with our finitude, our fragility, our condition of anxiety, our mortality, our liability to choose unwisely, our general vulnerability. In the shadow of *these* truths, we may wonder whether, after all, ignorance is not bliss. Surely without courage, and in the end without faith, this bliss may well be preferable to knowing these disturbing truths about our world and ourselves.

At the same time, this bliss of ignorance misses something, or, more precisely, it misses everything, everything wonderful and rich, precious and excellent in our human existence. The fact is we can open our eyes to these riches only if we also open them and see the other, darker side. Eyes open to beauty must also be open to ugliness; eyes open to freedom must also be open to mortality. If we lose one side, we lose the other.

In short, my first lesson from Bill Poteat was a simple yet profound one: the human pursuit of knowledge, of truth, is a risky business. In some sense I knew this, but my education had kept it from me, or kept me from acknowledging it. Bill was inviting this acknowledgment. I had to hear more. I headed for Duke.

In my first year, I locked horns with Bill in "CC16," a beginning course in Christianity and Culture. It was a wrestling match I lost; and though I am all the better for the loss, I came away from that fight, perhaps a bit like Jacob, wounded, or at least afflicted, for life. What Bill managed to wrestle from me was my own deep-seated philosophical positivism. But I did try to ride that horse a little further, and, believe me, it was tough going, trying to stay on during Bill's dialectical and relentless questioning. And I must say I think he loved having me as his target, for I was giving articulation to just what he wanted us all to rethink. (How I love to this day to see students in my own classes that serve this function that I served so eagerly in Bill's.)

In Bill's class, we read Skinner, Darwin, Marx, and others, trying to get a grasp of what he liked to call modern sensibility—or what he had called in his Ph.D. dissertation, modernity's exteriorization of sensibility. For me, it was a critical moment in the class when Bill made what I took then—and still take—to be an enormously important distinction for him. That distinction is the one between what I might call a cosmological and a historical consciousness. He made this distinction in terms of the differences between the Greeks and the Hebrews. Of course, such distinctions between Athens and Jerusalem can be oversimplified and overdrawn, but he thought, and I think never stopped thinking, that there was something absolutely pivotal in this divide. If you look carefully, it is this distinction that plays a central role in *Polanyian Meditations*.

The deepest thesis of *PM*, as I see it, is this: Polanyi's logic, the logic of tacit knowing, a logic that Polanyi himself adopted without explicitly knowing it—a kind of testimony itself to tacit knowledge—is a dynamic, person-centered logic. This logic is deeply akin, we might say, to the logic of the Yawhist of the biblical narratives—call this the logic of *historical* contingency—and distinctly different from the reigning scientific logic—call this the static, objectivistic model of Greek *cosmological* metaphysics (or if you prefer, "Logocentrism").

You might be surprised to know it, but I think that Bill got much of his thinking on these matters from Soren Kierkegaard. I think he began reading SK when he was at Yale Divinity School. In this regard, he used to tell the story about an encounter with Paul Holmer at Yale: Bill was clutching SK's *Either/Or I* close to his heart, and, while walking up the stairs at Yale's library, he ran into Holmer, who told Bill that there was really

“nothing” in that work. I think, as a matter of fact, Bill found in it a lifetime of inspiration. And SK was on his mind at the very end of his life also. On his deathbed, he asked me to find a certain prayer of Kierkegaard that he was fond of; he wanted this prayer read at his memorial service that he and his wife Pat were planning. The service took place at Duke Chapel on May 24,th 2000.

I first saw how deep the influence of Kierkegaard was on Bill when I sat in on an undergraduate course he taught in Existentialist Thought. Although we read other works in that course, the primary text was Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or I*, and even more precisely, the first section of that book entitled, “The Immediate Stages of the Musical Erotic.” If you look at this section of *Either/Or I*, I am sure that you will see connections between it and the sections in *PM* where Bill made so much of the contrasts between hearing and seeing, and between music and speech.

Indeed, given his interest in speech, it was not strange for Bill to turn with such interest, as he did in the late fifties, to the work of Wittgenstein. While he was teaching philosophy at Chapel Hill, the department held a faculty colloquium on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. One of my mentors, Maynard Adams (Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, Chapel Hill who is presently in the final stages of his last illness) was involved in that colloquium. A long-time friend of Bill’s, Maynard was fond of telling me that it was in this department colloquium that Bill Poteat blossomed as a philosopher. In general, these were heady days in philosophy. Bill was caught up in the invasion of British ordinary language philosophy that Wittgenstein had inspired. He read J.L. Austin and wrote one of his finest articles of this period in which he took on Gilbert Ryle’s *Concept of Mind* (“God and the Private I,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1960). Bill never completely left the orbit of influence that ordinary language philosophy exerted over him.

Unlike the reputation that analytic philosophy has had, and despite Bill’s interest in it, especially in its insistence on precision of language and thought, his interests were far from narrow. He had an ongoing interest in philosophy and literature, especially so when he encountered the southern novelist, Walker Percy—himself explicitly influenced by Kierkegaard. He found much in the poet Elizabeth Sewell’s book *The Orphic Voice*, and much comfort and insight in the poetry of W.H. Auden. But of the authors of this sort, the one that had the firmest place in the so-called “Poteat canon” was Hannah Arendt, especially her work, *The Human Condition*.

When Taylor Scott and I invited him to come to Francis Marion University as a guest lecturer, he chose to talk on “The Banality of Evil,” a deep theme in Arendt’s thinking about the thoughtlessness of Adolph Eichmann—a kind of emblem of the thoughtlessness of modernity. In that talk he made it clear that he thought that modernity had destroyed “the world” in Arendt’s sense of this term, that is, what she called “the space of appearance.” Taking off from Arendt’s insights, Bill made it clear that he thought that the worldless would-be self in modernity, the self in despair, the spiritless self, had become nothing less than the vile and inhuman creature that Gregor Samsa had become in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.

With this interest in Arendt, and hence in the political, it surprised some of us that Bill’s “most productive time” as a scholar, if we measure this in publications, came with a more inward turn. This may come back to the influence of Kierkegaard, but it definitely was affected by the influence that Bill felt from Phenomenology, especially in the work of Merleau-Ponty. I think indeed that Bill’s final thinking on the matter is that this phenomenological approach, emphasizing embodiment as it does, provided the best lens through which to interpret Polanyi. Or put differently, I think that Bill came to think that the greatest

contribution of Polanyi's thought was to be found in his emphasis on the tacit ground of all knowledge and that this emphasis had its closest parallel in the emphasis of phenomenology on the body-as-subject, something Bill would later dub the "mindbody."

Recall that Bill often characterized modernity in terms of its exteriorized sensibility. Ever since Descartes, the body and the world had been abandoned by the mind. Bill thought that the reduction of the human being to a discarnate, bodiless, worldless, mind was madness. The therapy for this madness, he thought, was to find a way back into our embodiment and into our world. He saw Polanyi, with the help of Merleau-Ponty, and vice versa, as offering such a path to recovering our most primordial ground, our mindbodies.

It was at the behest of his students that Bill took this turn. They wanted him to write down for them what was only mysteriously present in the master's cryptic words—present only in the fleeting moments of one brilliant insight after another in the classroom discussions. But this was not enough. Students needed something to put their hands on, a book. So began the writing of *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (1985). And then followed on its heels, *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (1990) and *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection* (1994).

In these works, it was as though Bill had finally found the idea he had always been searching for, that silver bullet that would be modernity's *coup de grace*. That concept—that reality—of course, was the "mindbody." I am sure he thought, for he said as much, that his discovery—that the mindbody is at the very center of reality—was going to set "forth an ontological Copernican revolution." He had, to put it in Wittgenstein's famous phrase, finally hit "bedrock." Having found the tacit, deep, unmediated ground of reality, I think Bill must have thought, now at last we can recover the ground of our human existence, our bodies-in-the world, at last we will be able to recover from the madness of disembodiment. As he put it so eloquently: "From this seamless, ontological bedrock [our mindbodies], all of our dualisms have been brought forth by reflection. They never cease to be founded there; in action they disappear there."

I was not at the time, but I am now, equivocal about this tenacious turn towards the mindbody in Bill's thinking. As I have reflected on it, it seems to me that he moved altogether too far away from his earlier interest in speaking, and hence in human forms of being together in the world, in what Arendt called the space of appearance. Indeed, there was even a certain irony in this turn, for the writer of these works on the mindbody seems much more solitary than Bill was in his real life. His real life, then and indeed always, was among others; his real life was in conversation, in lively speech. Yet after *PM*—and I don't mean after sunset, for this is just as true in the "Daybook"—I sensed a certain darkness overtaking Bill's reflections. In his retirement, he was often alone, alone with his writing, with his thoughts; but there was something more: there seemed to me a certain grief in him, a grief perhaps over what he was inclined to call our modern loss of the world. Like the hands in Escher's drawing on *PM's* dust jacket, this grief seemed to turn him more and more toward himself, more and more toward the mindbody.

My reservations about Bill's turn toward, indeed his obsession with, the mindbody are not easy to express. Perhaps I can do it best by simply summarizing some of the thoughts about this matter that I wrote to Bill when he and Pat were in Greece. At the time, Bill had taken up anew his long-standing interest in the work of Cézanne. The result was an essay on Cézanne that was never published. But Bill did share the essay with me. Let me distill some of my comments that I made to him at the time regarding this essay. I think this

expression of my reservations about Bill's idea of the mindbody may be the best I can do. What I said to him was something like the following:

I sometimes get the impression, Bill, that you think that the mindbody is our access to the Real. I think we might part company here, for I am inclined to think that words are our access to the Real. If you are correct, then words can only be an expression of a prior, immediate, tacit access to reality. On this view, words could not be essentially constitutive of the Real. But I thought you might agree with me on this, for a favorite quotation of yours is Auden's wonderful expression: "A sentence uttered makes a world appear." But doesn't a sentence also make the Real appear? As Wittgenstein might have asked: "Isn't what a thing is, deeply connected to what it is called? If not, then pre-linguistic children or animals are closer to the Real than we speakers are. Does language corrupt our immediate rapport with reality, or does it provide us with our unique access to it? I am not sure we get closer to reality the deeper we go. Perhaps it is true that every good house has a strong foundation. But that is not where we live, even though all of our living is supported by it. There is a difference between saying that the mindbody is the center of the Real and saying that it is its ground. I quite agree with you that the pre-reflective mindbody is the ground, and that we need to recover it, but I remain convinced that it is in words that we find its absolute center. And I am afraid that we are losing the confidence in words that must be there if they are to carry our existence.

These reservations about Bill's turn toward the mindbody, however, need not—and certainly do not for me—obviate the enormous contribution that Bill's work has provided. With each day the madness of modernity seems a little closer to a full take-over of ordinary good sense. Bill could not have been more accurate in his analysis of modernity. He knew that our unique modern madness is not simply the madness of having lost our minds—it is much worse. He knew also that we in modernity have lost our bodies. But I cannot help but add to this, that we in modernity have also lost our world, and this because we have lost confidence in our most precious gift, our words. These losses threaten our very existence as human beings. In the climate of these losses, heeding Bill's voice, ever urging us toward a recovery of the Ground, is perhaps our only hope.

Endnotes

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