

# William H. Poteat, An Oblique Introduction

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, William H. Poteat, Marjorie Grene.

*I here introduce a set of essays on William H. Poteat by quoting in full a 1968 letter from Poteat to Marjorie Grene. Poteat articulates reasons he cannot collaborate with Grene in editing the volume of Polanyi essays that was eventually published as Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi in 1969.*

This issue marks the third time that *Tradition and Discovery* has focused on the thought and work of William H. Poteat.<sup>1</sup> Poteat was one of the first American scholars to take an interest in the thought of Michael Polanyi back in the fifties. Scott and Moleski report in *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher* (226) that Poteat visited Polanyi in Manchester in 1955 after discovering Polanyi's 1952 essay "The Stability of Beliefs," an essay ultimately incorporated in *Personal Knowledge* that has drawn attention from many scholars. Poteat soon became an intimate friend and intellectual colleague of Polanyi who was valued until the end of Polanyi's life. Certainly, as the essays in this and earlier issues of *TAD* show, Poteat inspired generations of Duke students and shared with them his enthusiasm for post-critical thought.

I am not sure that many interested in Polanyi and Poteat know that in the late sixties, Poteat was slated to edit, along with Marjorie Grene, what was at first called "Collected Papers" but eventually became *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*. There is a very interesting letter of January 8, 1968, from Poteat to Grene about this project; it is preserved in the Papers of Michael Polanyi in the University of Chicago Library<sup>2</sup> because Poteat sent Polanyi a carbon copy. As an oblique introduction to Poteat and the set of essays about working with Poteat that follow, I am including the letter (which I stumbled across many years ago) in full below. It was an eloquent but informal letter, and I have not tried to annotate or doctor (with sic) it in any way. It is clear enough. It is an interesting tidbit of history, but it also tells us something about William Poteat and his sense of vocation.

January 8, 1968

Professor Marjorie Grene  
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Dear Marjorie:

I have by now had time to explore your proposition as to how the Collected Papers project might be brought off. And I have had an opportunity too, to sort through many personal considerations which clearly entered into my overly pessimistic judgment in my last letter to you—though I was quite unaware at the time of the extent to which they were determining my evaluation of our prospects.

Let me discuss these two factors separately and then put them together to see what, together, they mean.

There is no doubt that you have an editorial genius! The way in which you sketch out a plan for the C. P. does indeed make good sense. It has a shape which the integrity of the component papers intimates; it shows the real developments of M's. thought that go beyond P. K. and firm-up T.D. All this can be made sense of—though, as you say, it will be very difficult. And I agree that the arduousness of the task is not, by itself, reason for faint-heartedness. So much for that.

On the other side, there are these personal considerations that belong in the picture. It is regrettable that I have been so slow to see their bearing upon my view of the project and perhaps, even worse, that I allowed them no place at all when I accepted Michael's invitation.

When Michael asked me in Washington to be your collaborator, I agreed instinctively, without a moments thought. The sobering discovery that I had contracted in on a far more difficult assignment than, circumstances being what they are, I should have, somewhat threw me off my stroke.

What are these circumstances? I will not bore you with a complex analysis which I fear will shed little light in any case. Briefly, I am trying to do at Duke what should be the job of two and probably three men. It is not a question of mere volume of work, which in itself is always manageable. It is rather a matter of the constant pressure produced by a radical—essentially a Polanyian—attack upon the present intellectual climate, prosecuted in a program set in a quite conventional graduate school. My appointment to a Professorship in Christianity and Culture was a great gaffe, if seen in terms of the conventional interests of the Establishment, since they unwittingly gave me great latitude—which I have been quick to seize upon. But from the point of view of my own life-long though modest war on the Cartesian ethos it has been a great boon. In eight years, I have achieved an intellectual influence—by no means confined to religion in which, in any ordinary sense, I have little interest—which is quite disproportionate for one man; and the latitude unwittingly conceded has, as I have exploited it, achieved the kind of “built-in-wobble” in the structures of the graduate school which Don Weismann has observed, makes it tolerable. None of this is something I have sought. Even less is it something I have deserved. In moments of self-doubt, only Michael's example persuades me I am wrong to think I don't belong in the university.

In practice, this means that far more graduate students, in their own desperation, are wanting to join the “happy few” than can easily be managed (I have ten dissertations in process under my supervision)—especially when I, my ideas, hence my candidates and their unconventional dissertations are deeply suspect. I am not, mind you, without moral and personal support, but I have few allies—though Ruel's coming to Chapel Hill is a part of the grand strategy.

Additionally, I have a fourteen month leave of absence beginning in June 1968 during which I plan to fulfill a goal of ten years' standing—I shall intensively study art history, all as part of the larger scheme I have described. This will take me farther away from the main line of my basic training than I have ever been. In order to risk so long an absence from my post

and from the daily “political” attention to my flanks, I have literally doubled my load for this academic year. I am trying to see through in one year one generation of graduate students. This was, of course, an insane project. But there it is. And I have vowed to deans, foundations, etc. that I will not compromise the time of my sabbatical with any addenda to my stated project.

I tell you all of this not to ventilate my sorrows. They are not even sorrows, but rather my joys. But now that I have succeeded in seeing through my own self-deception, I want to come clean with you (and Michael)—though there certainly was no conscious dissembling in the first instance.

All of this comes to saying that I was guilty of hybris in saying “yes” to Michael’s original overture and cannot see the point in compounding my original crime, by reaffirming it after recognizing it for what it is.

It is pointless for me to say how painful it is to me to have betrayed you and Michael—since, you being the kinds of friends towards whom infidelity is possible, already know this.

Having said this, let me now conclude with what I do believe is not merely a self-justifying judgment: you alone can do the job which you have outlined—and, indeed, any conceivable alternative—better than the two of us together could.

If my estimate of the importance of my own projects seems to you rather grand, as they do to me upon reading through the above, you will nevertheless accept it, I trust, as an estimate which, most of the time, I accredit myself with discrimination enough confidently to affirm.

All the best, dear Marjorie,  
Ever,

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See *TAD* 21:1 and 35:2, but also other essays that have reflected upon or drawn on William Poteat such as those by R. Taylor Scott and Beth Newman in 20:1 as well as David Rutledge’s “William Poteat: The Primacy of the Person” in *Appraisal* 7:2 (October 2008): 31-37.

<sup>2</sup>The Papers of Michael Polanyi are in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library. This letter is in Box 16, Folder 2. Reproduction of this archival letter is with permission of the Department of Special Collections.