

But Bill . . . ?: Poteatian Meditations

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ABSTRACT Key Words: William H. Poteat, Michael Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Martin Buber, H. Richard Niebuhr, existentialism, tacit dimension, mindbody, linguistic meaning, critique of Enlightenment dualism, imagination, the dialogical, spoken/written meaning, gratitude.

Fascinated by Tradition and Discovery's appreciation for Bill Poteat (35:2), I express my gratitude for his brilliant Socratic teaching and graceful mentoring; explore his evocative thought that carried further and integrated Polanyi's tacit dimension, Merleau-Ponty's mindbody, Wittgenstein's linguistic meaning, and Buber's I and Thou—all except Buber discussed in Tradition and Discovery—and look as well at his other central concerns with imagination, the dialogical, and the differences between spoken and written meaning; engage Bill in some Poteatian meditations interrogating his comments on Creed, Eucharist, Resurrection, Being, God; and leave the reader where Bill left me with responsibility to speak forth in the first person what I am finding through mindbodily reflections on and from the tacit dimension.

I have read *Tradition and Discovery* 35:2 with fascination as former students and a colleague express their appreciation for, and inquire into the thought contributions of, Bill Poteat. The appreciation resonates in my soul with my gratitude for his dialogical Socratic teaching. Brilliantly, while caringly, opening students to our own deep selves, connecting head and heart, through the maieutic art of transformation, he sought to draw us out of the deracinate world of Enlightenment dualism to reflect on the ground of all knowing: our mindbodily being in the world—thus restoring us to ourselves in our bodies, in the world, among our fellow incarnate beings.

While I have been very clear about the life-saving, soul-engendering, intellectual-spiritual-quest inspiring way of his teaching, I have been caught up in the questionings of my Duke colleagues, those with whom I in fact shared Bill's classes from 1969-1971 and you whom I have not met but who have been similarly touched by his incendiary pedagogical self. Reading your comments about influences upon him, and Polanyi's premier place, and about his distinctive contributions in his writings, I have been thrust back to reread my class notes and his writings to reflect on what I would say about these.

Being drawn back into Poteat's world explicitly (I have, ever since study with him, been attending from it), I find my current writing about meaning and religious language being interrogated by Bill. What would he say about it? I perceive that this might be a fortuitous—one might even say providential (whatever that might mean)—moment to join with Poteatian Polanyians to say publicly my great gratitude to Bill for his loving, witty, circumambulating provocations, catching me up into the postcritical dance with word and body, not to mention guiding me through to completion of the Ph.D. It is as well the moment to figure out influences at play within him, the import of his written thought achievements, and to investigate from his perspective my ownmost self and emergent thinking.

No doubt, as everyone remarks, Bill was profoundly influenced by Michael Polanyi. Kieran Cashell's naming this "apprenticeship" is quite fitting.¹ In my experience of Bill's thinking in both teaching and writing, I would put alongside Polanyi: Merleau-Ponty. While I had encountered Polanyi before meeting Bill—through

a class with H. Richard Niebuhr on “Faith as Virtue” in 1960, and then, inspired by that, attending Polanyi’s delivering the Terry Lectures in 1962 that became *The Tacit Dimension*—it was with Bill that I first read Merleau-Ponty. While his emphasis on the tacit is clearly from Polanyi, the emphasis on body is clearly from Merleau-Ponty—not that Polanyi does not speak of the body, nor that Merleau-Ponty does not speak of pre-reflective consciousness. There are others, as well, of immeasurable significance: Kierkegaard and the whole existentialist tradition, especially Buber and Marcel.

H. Richard Niebuhr, with whom he had studied at Yale Divinity School in the 1940s, was very important, and back to whom he wisely directed my attention for my dissertation, saying: “You see postcritical elements in Niebuhr that I had some sense were there; let’s see you draw them out and develop them.” Bill indicates in *Recovering the Ground* that Niebuhr was “most congenial to my own investigations” as we both were “radically shift[ing] away from the ground upon which dualism arose.”²

Wittgenstein is obviously very important as Bill plunges into investigations of how language works, and attends especially, with the help of Buber’s exploration of I-Thou, to the grammar of first person speech. Two contemporary companions on the postcritical journey should be mentioned as well: Elizabeth Sewell and Stanley R. Hopper. I remember Bill talking about a panel he had been on (one of his rare public appearances, I do not know when or where) with both of them. As the men talked, Elizabeth took over and took away the conversation. After the session, Hopper met Bill in the hotel hall and asked: “What happened?” Bill responded “Oh, that’s Elizabeth Sewell!” While all three were working to transcend Cartesian dualism, Bill was closer to Elizabeth, and supported her helping start the religion department at University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

All of these thinkers were important to Bill. While there is no question about Polanyi’s indispensability, rather than assessing causally who was most important, I would say—in Polyanian language—that Bill attended deeply from all of them towards the creation of his own thought, or—in Merleau-Pontian language—that all were significantly present in the background of his prereflective thinking.

What were his contributions as thinker? The *TAD* essays rightly speak of the centrality of the tacit dimension, the mindbody, preoccupation with linguistic meaning, especially the first person singular, critique of Cartesian dualism and its Enlightenment development. Attending from Polanyi, he went beyond him by articulating the grammar of the tacit dimension and of personal knowledge. Attending from Merleau-Ponty, he went beyond him by combining Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with linguistic meaning with our bodily being in the world. Attending from Wittgenstein, he went beyond him with his inquiry into the grammar of first person speech. Attending from them all, he offered a way of speaking of the unity of self beyond modernity’s dualisms in the word “mindbody.” I remember him saying: “We were all born in the Enlightenment. Polanyi was fortunate in being a scientist and therefore did not know much of modern philosophy, so he was able to avoid many of its pitfalls.” What I do not find in the *TAD* essays, which I think of equal importance, are his interest in the imagination, the dialogical, and the distinction between spoken and written meaning.

The difference between oral-aural speaking and visual written language is central to his thought, returned to again and again in *RTG*. His frequent reference to Yahwist and Platonic (Dale Cannon discusses³) is making the same point. Earlier I did not know what to make of this because it sounded like the typical mid-century opposition of Jerusalem and Athens. Now as I have been pulled back into Bill’s writings, I see how important this is to his thought and I begin to get an inkling of its meaning.

Speaking and hearing are a dialogical event in time. In dialogue (between two or more “I’s”) it becomes clear, when reflected back upon in a way not evident in the written, that all language is temporal, bodily, and created by selves. Speaking and hearing shows the speaker existing in time coming from not having said something yet, to reaching for the fitting words, and then conveying them with one’s whole bodyself. The speaker draws from his or her past of engagement with meaning in and beneath, reaches towards giving shape to, articulating, meaning that is pressing towards form. Not only is the speaker reaching back and reaching forward in time, he or she is reaching down into the body. The grammar of our speaking is preformed in the sinews of our body, in the body’s prelingual logos and intentionalities: “Language—our first formal system—has the sinews of our bodies, which had them first. . . .” “Its grammar, syntax, metaphorical and semantic intentionalities were first and are still the ‘grammar,’ ‘syntax,’ ‘metaphorical’ and ‘semantical’ intentionalities of our mindbodies.”⁴ As the speaker dwells in time and his or her body, the listener is witness to an act of creation. Often in speaking the groping of thinking is evident as sentences are left incomplete or ungrammatical, as one backs up, diverges, circles around before arriving at the meaning one wants to say, yet from which one might take off again in several directions in the effort to say it better.

Bill distinguishes written language from speaking because what is written appears to have a reality of its own that is an object of sight rather than an act of speaking and hearing. Laid out in front of us, it appears unchanging, simultaneous, uncreated, as we think all too often in our modern world about eternity. Creativity of the “I” that created the linguistic meaning is not evident. That it came out of the rich nothingness of the writer’s bodily depths does not appear. Our culture of print, according to Bill, thus privileges sight over hearing, and objective thereness over personal being of “I’s” bringing something to form. The reality written seems to have an existence independent of writer and reader, as it sits there on the page or screen, while the reality spoken retains an intimacy with its shaper: it has this form, this meaning, because an “I” has exercised agency and responsibility within a given context in relationship to a particular listener. The situation is not only in a particular place, it is at a particular time, and the listener perceives that it takes time to bring forth those words.

Imagination is important because all knowing, whether poetic intuition or abstract reasoning, is imagining⁵—achieving (grasping and shaping) forms through our mindbodies. He uses a distinction from Piaget. “Reversible reason” works from premises that can be made explicit, so you can move from rational conclusion back to its premises. “Irreversible reasoning” moves towards novel meaning that cannot be traced back to premises because emergent from the hidden depths of the tacit dimension. The reversible (scientific) is dependent upon the irreversible reasoning (Romanticism’s “imagination”) as rooted in our mindbodies.⁶

As well as looking back into *RTG*, I have serendipitously recovered my notes on Bill’s dissertation, “Pascal’s Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility” (November 13, 1950). In the dissertation all these themes of the *TAD* essays and the ones I have added are sounded, immersed in existentialist thought, before he has encountered Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein. What will become “explicit” and “tacit” with Polanyi’s and Merleau-Ponty’s help was “exteriorization” and “interiorization.” What will become mindbody in response to the Cartesian mind/body split is his conclusion that truth is only known through the heart by starting from incarnation. What will become his distinction between oral-aural speaking and visual writing is his recognition that Descartes’ reason is after the analogy of seeing while Pascal’s reasoning is after the analogy of hearing (which depends upon the whole soul’s orientation).

Imagination is dominated in modernity by images of space and the sense of sight. This theme of imagination occurring early in the dissertation becomes the conclusion to his last book: imagination is what grips the real world and can be, must be, liberated from preoccupation with its own images detached from the self's mindbodily creative participation in the real.⁷

Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty, and all the others, can be seen, therefore, as companions in dialogue on the way and as bearers of meaning from which Bill attends to say what reality the logos of his mindbodily imagination articulates.

But Bill, why did you not go further, say what you saw about reality philosophically and theologically from the ground of your first-personal mindbody perspective? I understand Diane Yeager's disappointment.⁸ His career, however, was not theological critique and innovation nor elaboration of a philosophical world. He was focused on the "how" of our knowing and being, not the "what" (to use Kierkegaard's distinction). Like Socrates, he left a method of reflection in his students' mindbodies, but as well in his writings. Others of his generation were similarly focused on methodology, on the "how": Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Hopper, Heidegger, Marcel.

Perhaps the real value of his *oeuvre* is the radical question to us his readers: Have we been sufficiently transformed so as to be returned to our own mindbodily being in the world beneath our "critical" dualisms to play our Plato to his Socrates? By this I mean, not the ideas of Plato, but his dialogical (even if in writing) effort to say what reality looks like after Socratic liberation from enchainment to the objective world and our Cartesian framework. Can we, can I, step forth to say what we (I) believe, and thus engage with Polanyi's declared project: "The principle purpose of this book is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false."⁹ In saying what I believe, can I find a way to say it passionately that is persuasive to others, but especially to myself, so as to disarm my own "critical" embarrassment of saying empirically unfounded things that express those deep-lying tacit commitments I hold to be true?

I think Kieran Cashell is right to underscore Bill's intention to write in ways that "defeat their appropriation in order that, paradoxically, the reader will be forced to dwell in, reappropriate and come to value the logos of his or her own quotidian mindbodily life."¹⁰ Like Kierkegaard with his pseudonymities and Merleau-Ponty with his page-length involuted sentences, Bill throws the reader back onto his or her responsibility to reflect on what the logos of his or her own body would bring to presence in living words. In my own Quaker tradition Polanyi and Poteat's challenge is put by the founder, George Fox, confronting the soon-to-become mother of Quakerism, Margaret Fell, in non-philosophical mid-seventeenth-century English: You know what Christ and the apostles say, but "what canst thou say? . . . what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?"¹¹

It is that speaking from inwardness that I am trying to do as I write on the nature of religious language and reality. Now, re-immersing myself in Poteatian thought, I find myself being interrogated by Bill on whether I am succeeding, really, in getting beyond the Enlightenment mythos to speak as this mindbodily "I" that I am. I willingly take up the dialogue and want to respond.

As you are "exercising" your "critical" (see *RTG*'s subtitle) acumen on me, Bill, given all that you say,

how can you say what you do about the Nicene Creed? Can you say more of what your experience of “standing before God” is, how and what you hear in dialogue (like Abraham and Yahweh) with God? What does it mean in your mindbodily experience that God is speaking, that Christ is actually present in the Eucharist, that resurrection is a structure in the world as you stand before God? If mindbody is the ground of all our knowing and being, what is its ground? Ok, “Being.”¹² Can you reflect on what you mean by “Being?” How do you, does anyone, speak of these matters beyond dualism?

I remember Bill saying something about the Nicene or Apostles Creed similar to what Wally Mead records¹³: “I find myself increasingly wanting simply to say the Creed when asked about my theology.” Since you will not probe this theologically, you leave it to us to try to figure out what you mean. Is it what you affirm in *RTG*, that the creed is “myth”? You say: reciting it “make[s] a world appear” and expresses “the ultimate meaning and value for us of the world.”¹⁴ Clarifying that the language of creed is not a factual historical record but a mythic home for Christian mindbody dwelling makes sense. There are, however, several Christian myths. Why do you choose the orthodox one and how do you handle its problematic character? How, moreover, when you stress the spontaneity and novelty of speaking, drawing out from our mindbodily tacit dimension, can you, Bill, repair to a fixed formula and one written down? What would you do with most people who would misunderstand you to be asserting factual truth, who get hung up on the form as objective truth detached from the dynamism of mindbodies dwelling in the world, and some who would be willing to kill for that truth?

Your point, Bill, is an invaluable one about the way speaking makes visible the agency of the user by which words come into existence, whereas written language can appear detached from any making but rather seems to have an eternal (static, uncreated) being. But, Bill, is there really such a monolithic divide between the spoken and written? Your own Wittgensteinian panache should suggest multiple uses of both the spoken and written. Are there not forms of speech in which the creativity of the word-maker is not especially evident: a lecture, especially one that is read, a memorized recitation, a ritual repetition, scripture reading? Among the variety of written language some are especially powerful in making visible the reality that these are someone’s words that they have drawn forth and crafted through their mindbodily creativity: poetry such as Eliot, Hopkins, or Donne’s; autobiography such as Augustine’s *Confessions* or John Woolman’s *Journal*; dialogue such as Plato’s (while he is reaching for the eternally permanent, his dialogical form has a dynamic of people interacting in whose written speech the truth may in a particular moment and in a particular place be glimpsed); political writing such as Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” M.L. King, Jr.’s “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” and Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence.” In fact, Bill, your three meditative books do a very good job of making visible your own inimitable creative crafting of words.

Your argument, Bill, that our mindbodies are the ground of all empirical, scientific truths as well as of all philosophical and theological truths is powerful, but how do you handle these different language games where evidence is required in one and not (at least that kind of evidence) in the other? How do we discern truth in our irreversible reasonings (the ones without explicit premises), in what rises from the depths of our tacit commitments without empirical evidence? How do you discern the truth of God speaking to you? What in your mindbodily being in the world distinguishes the true from the false. Is it distinguishing our ego speaking from God’s speaking, or how would you put it? Perhaps there is a clue in Kieran Cashell’s suggestion to “feel its truth.”¹⁵ Your mentor H. Richard Niebuhr was talking about religious feeling as central to the meaning of our lives at the end of his life. Feeling, however, is not something you pursue, even though taking feeling with ontological seriousness would transcend Cartesianism.

If my mindbody is the ground of all my knowing and being, and Being is the ground of me, what is Being and how are we aware of it? Is it through feeling, tacit awareness, sensing reality within and environing the creative act of speech? In your lucid criticism of criticism's abstracting, totalizing, and monistic grip on things, you speak of "the penumbra of one's own mindbody"¹⁶ that Cezanne seeks to recover that shows there is more to reality than criticism can ever apprehend. Is this Being? What of its nature is shown forth in your mindbodily existence? Is this the silence of the background of mystery we dwell within, or how would you speak it into form?

When you write of the Eucharist as deeper than belief, as the "*presently actual* body and blood of Jesus Christ; and that, if they are not, then the Son of God has nothing to do with the concrete person I am in *this* time and place,"¹⁷ I am with you on the "real presence" of Christ in sacred space and time beneath belief, or as we Quakers would say "the presence in the midst," but, Bill, can you reflect on and say what in the world this means for you in your mindbodily existence? What are the clues of such presence? How do you know?

Among the nuggets that Jim Stines draws from your letter to Wally Mead is your talk about the resurrection. Since many Christians affirm the resurrection in a dualistic manner, can you, Bill, show how your affirmation is postcritical? What does it mean when you say "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" is "*enacting* and *identifying* . . . one of the features in the structure of the one and only world in which I actually live and move and have my being, *insofar as I recognize it as existing before God*."¹⁸ Can you reflect on and say what this structure is? I also love Paul's phrase, the whole in which "I live and move and have my being" (which recurs fifteen times in *RTG*), but what does it mean? Since many theologians have affirmed that they "exist before God" amidst dualisms of mind/body and spirit/matter, how do you mean it in a postcritical way? And what after all do you mean by "God?"

Oh I speak with unfettered audacity, in ways, when an apprentice, I never would have dreamed of. Yet you, Bill, sought through your own writing to elicit our first person mindbodily reflective life. My probing, therefore, in this dialogical form feels fitting. I ask questions because I do not know and want to know. I ask with passion because these questions matter, at least to me. In asking, Bill lodged in my mindbody may emerge as discovery of what he would say and of what I deep down want to say. Too late to engage him in dialogue? Perhaps, and yet:

What the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.¹⁹

How hard it is, especially in our Cartesian world (whether called "modern" or "postmodern"), to discover our deepest commitments. To carry on colloquy with Bill, who is part of me, of my embodied background (the "retrotensions" of my mindbody memory), is to solicit my own depths to speak. Perhaps, in my brash inquiry others may feel similar questions stirring in their depths that can emerge in authentic ways to speak from their mindbodies of the real beyond dualism?

I do not think, Bill, that what you would want is for us to repeat, if we can understand it, your own colloquy about mindbodily speaking and being, but for us to stand forth as the elusive "I" that each of us is "to find a new kind of discourse that can show forth the derivation of [all our concepts] . . . from the logos that enforms

our as-yet-unreflected mind-bodily sentience, orientation, and motility, anterior to duality. . . .”²⁰ At least this is where you have brought me with your brilliant life-engendering teaching. Your dialogical challenges have drawn me down and opened me up to dwelling in the logos of my body (stressing beyond Polanyi the bodyliness of the tacit dimension). You have left me, and many others, poised to begin to speak philosophically and theologically (whose separation you rightly reject²¹) what we see and hear as we live and move and have our being as mindbodies in the world—grounded in Being, before God.

It is within this mystery, as it comes to presence in Bill Poteat’s first person Socratic teaching, as he irrepressibly elicited, flagrantly provoked, caringly midwived my embodied reflective self, and lovingly recovered and nurtured my career as a dialogical teacher, that I want to say in this transient temporal moment, as the “I that I am” with my memories and anticipations, my eternal gratitude for the irrefragible embrangement of Bill Poteat in my life—the little bit of him that I knew—through the grace, wit, brilliance, and irrepressible speaking and listening that was Bill.

Endnotes

¹*Tradition and Discovery* 35:2 (2008-2009): 51-52.

²William H. Poteat. 1994. *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection (RTG)*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 115-116.

³*Tradition and Discovery* 35:2 (2008-2009): 27.

⁴*RTG*, 6 and 171.

⁵*RTG*, 65

⁶*RTG*, 61-70.

⁷*RTG*, 169-185.

⁸*Tradition and Discovery* 35:2 (2008-2009): 35.

⁹Michael Polanyi. 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 214.

¹⁰*Tradition and Discovery* 35:2 (2008-2009): 56. From *RTG* 4.

¹¹Margaret Fell Fox, “The Testimony Concerning Her Late Husband George Fox.” Mary Garman, et al, eds. 1996. *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker Women’s Writings 1650-1700*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 235.

¹²*RTG*, 141.

¹³*Tradition and Discovery* 35: 2 (2008-2009): 10 and 40-41.

¹⁴*RTG*, 91-92.

¹⁵*Tradition and Discovery* 35: 2 (2008-2009): 56.

¹⁶*RTG*, 150.

¹⁷*RTG*, 135; his italics.

¹⁸*Tradition and Discovery* 35: 2 (2008-2009): 41; his italics.

¹⁹T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *The Four Quartets*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1943; 1971. Lines 49-51.

²⁰*RTG*, 167.

²¹*RTG*, 116-117.