

“Thanks For Everything, Poteat!”: An Intellectual (But Personal) Autobiography

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ABSTRACT Key Words: William Poteat, modernity, postmodernists, critical theorists, post-critical, New Criticism, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, personal knowledge.

These comments reflect upon my doctoral study with William Poteat as a nontraditional student between 1986-92 and also upon the academy and collegiality vis a vis Poteat and “Poteatians.”

I was one of Bill Poteat’s “last students.” I entered the Ph.D. program in Religion and Culture at Duke in the Fall of 1986, and Poteat retired at the end of the following semester. I had just finished a Master’s degree in Religion at Wake Forest the preceding spring. I knew that Poteat was near retirement when I entered, but he and I talked about that, and he agreed to continue to work with me until I finished my degree, which turned out to be Spring 1992.

My situation was somewhat unusual: I was an older student with a husband and two children at home in Charlotte. My husband was well settled in his job and our children in their schools, and we really had no interest in moving to Durham where he and I had been undergraduates at Duke some years earlier. So every semester from the Fall of 1986 to the Spring of 1988, I drove to Durham for my classes, spent a couple of nights in a cheap motel, and then drove back home. Thus it was inevitable that my contact with Poteat during that time was limited primarily to classes with him, classes that were often held at his home, especially after his official retirement.

I was friends with a number of his earlier students—men who had finished their degrees in the late sixties or early seventies. I knew from them that Poteat was much closer to some of his students than others— something that was once described to me by one of those men as “concentric rings” of students, a sort of “inner ring” of those closest and an “outer ring” of the others. While I was Poteat’s student it was true that there was one student that he was closer to than the rest of us (a student who had also studied with Poteat as an undergraduate), but I don’t think any of the rest of us ever felt seriously “shut out” when it came to Poteat’s engagement with us.

I begin with this personal detail because in what follows I want in part to respond to Robert Osborn’s 2008 *Tradition and Discovery* article entitled “Bill Poteat: Colleague?” (35:2, 44-47). There Osborn wrote,

My colleagues and I at Duke University recognized that Bill was an impressive and remarkable man. . . . He was an attractive person—brilliant, widely read, very charming, even winsome, and a scintillating intellectual. However, he was a mystery. I don’t think any of us in the Department of Religion knew him or began to know him” (44).

Osborn continued,

During all the time he was with us—some 27 years . . . —we never heard his story. . . . It seems, as I look back, that he did not share his self-understanding or his professional story with any

of his colleagues. He was simply absent in spirit and mind, and ... generally absent in body. He spent little time in the Department precincts except for his meetings with students and for mandated department meetings that he chaired with considerable success. Otherwise he was minimally present. We rarely had coffee, not to mention a beer, together; we shared no extracurricular time that I recall. He did not attend meetings of the American Academy of Religion, regional or national, even when colleagues were performing. In short he was not really a colleague in the sense that we normally think of a colleague. In fact, one of my colleagues who was also Bill's and whom I asked about Bill as a colleague, retorted, "Bill as a colleague? That's an oxymoron" (44).

But as Osborn went on to make clear, "Bill was first and finally a teacher" (45). Indeed he was, and those of us who had him as a teacher throughout his long career were indeed blessed to have such a one. Although—at least in my view, and others may disagree—as I reflect on the experience almost eighteen years later, the blessing is a mixed one.

But I wouldn't trade it for another.

As Osborn wrote about Poteat, "The focus of his teaching was not the history or tradition of philosophy but rather his own philosophy which appears to have been developing in and through his teaching" (45).

Yes, it is true that in his classes we read Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, and Kierkegaard, especially *Fear and Trembling*, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and, of course, Michael Polanyi's works, especially *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. My copy of *PK*, like, I suspect, that of my confreres, is not only full of marginal notes but dog-eared, battered, and patched.

Oddly, for a reason central, I think, to being Poteat's student, it is Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy* that in one way stands out most in my memory. *Freud and Philosophy* is a ponderous tome, and it was the assigned reading for the first class I had with Poteat. As a class of mostly newbies, we struggled and struggled with it. Some years later, I read a much smaller volume of Ricoeur's and said to a friend, another former student of Poteat's, "Why didn't he just have us read this instead? Ricoeur is doing the same thing in here that he does in *Freud and Philosophy* but in many fewer words!" The "thing" that Ricoeur was doing and that Poteat wanted us to *experience*, not just "see," was Ricoeur's not-so-latent Cartesianism. Poteat was convinced that in order for us to know something different from the Cartesian water that we swam in, it was necessary for us to struggle and struggle; his choice of *Freud and Philosophy* rather than the much shorter book (the title of which I have now forgotten) was deliberate, I believe. It was only because I had *struggled* through *Freud and Philosophy* with Poteat and my fellow students that I could later see the same pattern in the shorter book.

After Ricoeur came Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, Polanyi, and Poteat's own *Polanyian Meditations*, and the insights into the subject-object dichotomy and the "disembodied ego-centrism of Cartesianism" gradually became easier.

I believed then, and still believe now, however, that I was somewhat less captive to modernity and its blandishments than some of Poteat's students. I had grown up in Oxford, Mississippi in the fifties and early sixties,

the daughter of Phil Stone, a lawyer with two undergraduate degrees—one from the University of Mississippi and the other from Yale—and two law degrees from the same institutions. My father had been born in Oxford in the late nineteenth century and had been a close friend and literary mentor to William Faulkner in their early years. In fact, as young men Faulkner and my father often took long walks together sharing stories and tall tales about the early efforts at “modernization” in Lafayette County, stories that Faulkner transmuted into his work, especially his Snopes trilogy (*The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*) which he dedicated to my father. (One of the dedications reads “To Phil Stone, He did half the laughing for thirty years.” The two of them, one a talker, the other a writer, but neither an actor, seem to have found ironic humor to be the best way of dealing with the encroaching modernity that they saw around them.) My mother, Emily Stone, was an aspiring fiction writer herself and a sworn foe of the discipline of philosophy. Indeed, both my parents believed avidly that truth is to be found in stories, including the ones that they told with relish—not in theories and *certainly* not in academic philosophy. This view was literally my mother’s milk. And so the combination of my somewhat premodern parents and our fairly premodern town insulated me to a certain degree from modernity itself.

But, if I had been somewhat insulated before, that came to an end when I arrived at Duke as an undergraduate in the Fall of 1966. I came believing that stuff about truth residing in stories, and I liked to read—so naturally I became an English major.

And encountered New Criticism, a *modern* literary approach if there ever was one. We weren’t reading to discover “truth” (of all things!), but rather to discover how the disembodied author (with no personal history worth noticing) had constructed metaphors, similes, and plot. Reading that way certainly wasn’t very interesting, but at the time I didn’t have the understanding to know why this way of reading seemed so meaningless.

But one way in which I was a bit more modern was my fine adolescent disdain for religion, especially the Methodist variety. This bit of modernity I had also imbibed from my mother (likewise, one of her few concessions to modernity). So, as I learned later, the unfortunate result of this influence meant that it never occurred to me that there might be someone like Bill Poteat in the Religion Department at Duke. And so I missed my chance then.

Time brings change. Fifteen years later, I was pretty sure that I wanted to do graduate work in religion, but my nine hours of religion at Duke (three of them the still-required Bible course) hardly qualified me for a graduate program, so I got busy with “remedial work.” As part of that, I encountered Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, taught by Ed St.Clair, one of Poteat’s former students, in the Religious Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. (Poteat himself regularly taught this text to undergraduates at Duke.) I was fascinated with Arendt, but so completely innocent of *any* philosophical training, I could hardly penetrate her work. When it came time to write a paper for the class, I seized on the one thing that I thought I could say something about: her discussion of stories.¹

So thanks to Arendt and St.Clair, I began to realize that there was a diagnosis of and a treatment for the chronic complaint I had only vaguely realized I suffered from: a dis-ease with modernity itself. St. Clair encouraged me to pursue the graduate work with Poteat, and so I did, as I indicated above.

What an experience! And I use the word “experience” deliberately. There was very little “mastery of content” in Poteat’s classes. Instead he trained us to think in a *deeply* critical way about modernity, although certainly not in the way that the contemporarily fashionable postmodernists and critical theorists were thinking.

In fact, Poteat liked to accuse them of cultivating *frisson* for its own sake when they made ostentatious proclamations about such matters as “the slipperiness of language” or claimed that language is a prisonhouse. As he pointed out, rather than moving beyond the assumptions of modernity, these writers seemed to be merely articulating its “flip side”: if modernist assumptions about the value of objectivity, science, and the rest are false, then the only thing left for us is despair. For Poteat, the answer to modernity was not postmodernism; instead it consisted in a post-critical approach that valued among other things Polanyi’s personal knowledge and rejected disembodiment and the split between mind and body.

And what did that mean? Well, it’s not easy to explain, as I know from having attempted it a number of times. When, for example, I have tried to break my students from speaking of “objective” and “subjective” knowledge and tried to get them to understand and think of “personal knowledge,” I have only been successful in getting them to use the latter term as an apparent concession to what they seem to assume is an individual quirk of mine. I would feel more frustrated by this if I had not had the pleasure of once being able to discuss it with Sir John Polkinghorne, whose work is influenced by Polanyi, and learned that he agreed with me about the near-impossibility of getting undergraduates to understand the concept.

But the difficulty is by no means limited to undergraduates. In response to questions from some of Poteat’s colleagues and my own, I have made attempts to explain post-critical philosophy, and the results were no more encouraging. (Although the failure was perhaps mine; Murry Jardine has done an outstanding job of giving a brief explication of Poteat’s thought in this issue.) It does appear, however, that the *struggle* and a serious commitment over time to reading, thinking, and talking are required to understand and explicate.

So in response to Osborn on Poteat as a colleague, I would say that maybe the difficulty was not so much with Poteat, but instead with his “colleagues” themselves. Of course such a difficulty is understandable. Scholars immerse themselves in their own small area of specialty and, other than coffee or a beer and academic gossip and politics, they are unlikely to have serious intellectual conversations with anyone except those whose specialty resembles their own.

And then there was the additional difficulty that Poteat was not a scholar. (He didn’t even go to American Academy of Religion meetings to listen to papers on smaller and smaller academically fashionable topics written by those hoping to win tenure!) Instead, Poteat was a thinker - an embodied one— who was willing to do his thinking out loud for those who were willing to commit to the struggle and attempt to think along with him.² And those were his students, and so he *was* a teacher. And we’re grateful to him for it.

But I wrote above that this blessing was a mixed one. When I finished my degree and gained colleagues and students of my own, I discovered that I really had nothing - no *content*—to teach to undergraduates. For years I scrambled mightily to master the content needed to teach the undergraduate courses that my colleagues wanted taught in institutions less selective than Duke. The result has been that I have had little opportunity to pass on the kind of insight that Poteat gave to me.

The advantage I had, of course, was that I had had the model of Poteat, someone willing to think and learn along with his students. But my colleagues have never seemed to appreciate this capacity much; the issue was what did I *know* and what *information* could I transmit to my students. (I realize that I may sound bitter when I write this, although I believe that I’m simply being realistic about the academy and what kind of teaching it

generally wants from colleagues.) But as I also wrote above, I wouldn't trade this mixed blessing for another one. Few graduate students have the experience those of us who were Poteat's students have had and many probably wouldn't want it. That experience taught us to think in a *deeply* critical way about modernity and offered us in Poteat's post-critical philosophy an effective treatment for modernity's diseases. But yes, we're an odd bunch.

When I heard that Poteat was dying, I wrote him a note that said merely, "Dear Poteat, Thanks for everything." I was confident he would know what I meant.

Endnotes

¹In Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) Chapter IV, "Work," in Section 23, "The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art."

²When I went back to my copy of *The Human Condition* to find the section in which Arendt speaks of stories, I noticed that this is also the section in which she distinguishes between thinking and cognition. There she says,

Thought and cognition are not the same. Thought, the source of art works, is manifest without transformation or transfiguration in all great philosophy, whereas the chief manifestation of the cognitive processes, by which we acquire and store up knowledge, is the sciences. Cognition always pursues a definite aim, which can be set by practical considerations as well as 'idle curiosity'; but once this aim is reached the cognitive process comes to an end. Thought, on the contrary, has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results. Not only the utilitarian philosophy of *homo faber* but also the men of action and the lovers of results in the sciences have never tired of pointing out how 'useless' thought is - as useless as the works of art it inspires (170).

Her statement, it seems to me, has relevance to Poteat vis a vis the academy—a place where much more cognition than thought goes on, and not just in the sciences.

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) digital archives containing all issues of *Tradition and Discovery* since 1991; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) the history of Polanyi Society publications, and information on locating early publications not in the archive; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi," which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Polanyi; (7) links to a number of essays by Polanyi as well as audio files for the McEnerney Lectures (1962) and Polanyi's conversation with Carl Rogers (1966).