

Poteat Changed My Life

John Berkman

ABSTRACT Key Words: William H. Poteat, post-critical, Wittgenstein, religion

These short remarks are a belated expression of thanks for the gift in my life that was Poteat. When Poteat died, I was spending time at a Trappist monastery, and never got word until after the funeral. I greatly regretted not being there. While I had the opportunity to tell Poteat during his lifetime how much he meant to me and the wonderful gift he gave to me, after his death, I never got or took the opportunity to tell that to others. This is my very belated attempt so to do.

I first heard about Poteat shortly after I arrived at Duke in the fall of 1987. A couple of fellow students in a Hauerwas seminar (Araminta Johnston and Beth Newman) who were a year ahead of me in the program told me about a fantastic seminar they had had the previous semester on Wittgenstein with a Professor Poteat. Having been introduced to—and smitten by—Wittgenstein’s thought as an undergraduate at Toronto and Oxford, I was enthusiastically interested. After saying I would sign up the next time the course was offered, they told me that Poteat had just retired. I eventually learned that some of these students were continuing to work with Poteat, some doing reading courses with him. This evolved into a colloquy, and before long I was invited along to participate. I was intrigued and became a part of the group, and it changed my life.

From 1988 to 1993, off-and-on but mostly on, I was part of a colloquy at Poteat’s house. After a couple of years, the students who had originally invited me left Durham, and I had the pleasure of inviting various and sundry people (mostly graduate students) to the group. Over the six years or so that I was a part of the group, it included Araminta Johnston, Beth Newman, Murray Jardine, Rob Baird, Gail Hamner, Randy Styers, Janine Crawley, Steve Long, and Jim Fodor. In terms of chronology, Johnston, Newman, Jardine and I were regular members relatively early on with Baird participating on occasion. After Johnston and Newman left around 1990, Jardine and I continued on joined by Hamner and for a while by Styers. In the academic year 1992-1993, Long, Crawley, and Fodor joined the group. I left Durham in the summer of 1993, and to my knowledge the colloquy did not continue beyond 1993.

One unfortunate part of my personality is that I have a terrible memory for details (I may well have the above chronology wrong). But what I do remember well is how over those years Poteat instructed and inspired me to develop as a thinker. I use the term “thinker” deliberately. Although Poteat was surely a scholar and an academic, he was most and primarily a thinker. By “a thinker” I mean that Poteat was primarily concerned to investigate the most fundamental questions of what it means for us to be human persons and to live and dwell in the world. Wittgenstein was a key interlocutor for Poteat. For Poteat, like Wittgenstein, thought that professional philosophy more often obscured than illuminated the human condition. For Poteat, it was specifically the critical project of Cartesian modern philosophy (that is, the assumption that skepticism is the first obstacle to be solved if we are to come to a true understanding of ourselves and our place in the world) that had to be overcome. By “overcome,” Poteat wanted us simply to refuse to accept that project from the get go, and begin in a very different place. He displayed both the untenable assumptions and the devastating consequences of the modern critical project. Hence, Poteat’s “post-critical” investigations.

But while I say that Poteat instructed and educated me, this was not by lecture or any other didactic means. So how did he educate me? Perhaps the best way to explain this is to begin with the *modus operandi* of the colloquy. Although over the years we had the privilege of reading one of Poteat's books in manuscript form (*Post-Critical Investigations* – later published as *A Philosophical Daybook*) in the spring of 1989, the primary and recurring texts for the colloquy for the duration of my time with it was the work of Wittgenstein, including *Philosophical Investigations*, *On Certainty*, and *Culture and Value*. However, we also read variously from other authors, including e.g. Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, O.K Bouwsma, Ong, and various essays by Poteat, and at times presented to each other our own works in progress.

The first thing to say about how the colloquy operated is that Poteat's way of approaching texts was revelatory for me. Although we were to read something (typically something rather short) from, for example, Wittgenstein prior to our meeting, we were not expected to "figure out" much less be prepared to give "the meaning" of the text, and certainly not give a tidy summary of it. Participants were expected to simply have questions or comments about the text, or could raise insights inspired by the text. Typically, one participant would prepare a couple of pages of reflections to start the discussion. In our discussions, we would cover as much or as little of the text as the conversation naturally allowed. We never hurried to "cover" the reading, but pored over passages and paragraphs until each had had their fill of it. In this I think the group was true to Wittgenstein's wish that his work be read slowly. It was also incredibly liberating. On the one hand, we were allowed to spend the whole session on a sentence or two from a text. On other days, we might skip over most or all of the reading—if no one wanted to raise questions or make comments about it—and might well decide to discuss some other philosophical issue or problem that was on someone's mind. In this way, the sessions also sometimes functioned as (a Wittgensteinian) therapy, with different participants "on the couch" at different meetings.

A second point about the colloquy was that while we thought philosophically, we were to come at the texts and philosophical problems "wholistically," that is, with our whole being. In these sessions, there was not "a" much less "the" meaning of the text to be "gotten." Rather, we engaged with the text from where we were able to do so, engaging it with the honest questions that we could and did bring to the text, questions that were being raised for us in the course of our various graduate studies, questions that affected not just some aspect of our intellectual approach or perspective, but our own self-understanding. Of course, that did not mean "anything goes" with regard to our reading of Wittgenstein or any other text, as the readings of the text that members presented were regularly questioned and scrutinized. But it was in the context of an atmosphere of trust and respect that members of the colloquy brought their honest and over time—deepest—questions and reflections to the group, because it was an atmosphere that supported and encouraged that.

Third, while the colloquy was always philosophical and typically with a jovial spirit, it at times could and would be of deep personal import for the participants. One week someone might present on the nuances of the private language argument or on the issue of sensation in Wittgenstein, but another meeting someone would present on philosophical dimensions of a problem in their work or their religious practice or even their everyday practices and relationships. Some colloquy members stuck closer to the questions raised by the text. Others were more likely to begin by a discussion of a contemporary news event or an aspect of our everyday lives, and how the reading suggested insight into an aspect of our lives. For example, I myself underwent a discernment process that led me to become Roman Catholic, and I brought some of my thinking through of that to the group in the fall of 1991 and the spring of 1992. It was a testament and testimony to the group that the colloquy never separated philosophical reflection from the hurly-burly of ordinary life.

Even while I was still a graduate student, I was coming to see the profound import of Poteat on my thinking and my life. I had gone to Duke to study Christian ethics with Stanley Hauerwas, and Hauerwas' work was deeply formative in my way of thinking about theological ethics. But as I noted to myself then and would still claim, that while Hauerwas might have taught me more than anyone else "what" to think, it was Poteat who taught me more than anyone else "how" to think.

So what was it for Poteat to teach me how to think? It was never explicit, but it was his wisdom-in-action in the colloquy that rubbed off on me over time. A significant part of his influence on me was in teaching me how to ask questions, to be more aware of how little I understood things and thus to increase my intellectual curiosity, and also to better recognize and name poor or non-sensical questions. Poteat had a wonderful Socratic presence in the colloquy, not dominating or even initiating most of the conversation. His questions, while inevitably exposing facile or woolly-headed aspects of what we were saying or writing, were never directed to us to expose our error or foolishness, but to have us probe deeper into our own questions. He probed our comments and asked us questions that carefully and sharply pointed at what needed to be examined further and deeper.

In saying what I have said, I am aware of how inarticulate I am. I am profoundly aware that I absorbed the lessons Poteat gave me and they changed me; but much of what at the time was so challenging and revolutionary is now so obvious to me, and so it is not easy for me to recognize, much less articulate, the extent of Poteat's influence on me.

Thank you Poteat.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. MLA or APA style is preferred. Because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody's "standard English." Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered. Consistency and clear writing are expected. Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment.

Phil Mullins
MWSU
St. Joseph, MO 64507
Phone: (816) 271-5686
Fax (816) 271-5680
mullins@missouriwestern.edu

Walter Gulick
MSU, Billings
Billings, MT 59101
Phone: (406) 657-2904
Fax (406) 657-2187
WGulick@msubillings.edu