

POLANYI FOR HUMANISTS: AN APPRECIATION OF THE WORK OF WILLIAM H. POTEAT

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ABSTRACT

William Poteat's work took Michael Polanyi's post-critical thinking into humanistic fields. This paper explores some of the reflections of current philosophers on Poteat's contributions.

Why should people who take philosophical inspiration from Michael Polanyi be interested in a collection of papers about the work of William H. Poteat? One answer is that Poteat was so instrumental in introducing Polanyi's work to Americans, but another and more important one is that Poteat's own work inflected the post-critical insights of Polanyi in ways particularly useful in the humanities. It gave them a heuristic boost in those domains of discourse. Such wider considerations of Polanyi's work have loosened the constraints of modernism in many fields and deepened an appreciation for how widely applicable his epistemological insights are. Poteat is preeminent among those who have redirected Polanyi's wake-up call to the sciences to the more directly humanistic studies he worked in.

Most of the essays in this volume come from a celebration held at Yale University in June of 2014, a celebration by Poteat's former students on the occasion of his papers being archived at Yale's Divinity School. The essays include seven examinations of his philosophical anthropology, three considerations of post-critical theology, and one that explores post-critical aesthetics. The final essay is Poteat's previously unpublished paper, "Paul Cézanne and the Numinous Power of the Real." These essays, especially those by Bruce Haddox and Edward St. Clair, include richly evocative reminiscences of what it was like to be Poteat's student. They also, especially those by Dale Cannon and Ron Hall, include fine expositions of Polanyi's thought. I, however, am going to pay special attention to those elements of the essays that demonstrate ways Polanyi's insights were developed by Poteat.

The essays by Cannon and Hall include careful exposition of the term "post-critical" as Polanyi understood that term. These essays also present a widened scope for how we think of the "from" or tacit pole of awareness in Poteat's work, a scope that emphasized the historical roots of the personal modality of being, particularly its nexus

of personal relationships and places that ground our concrete sense of who we are. Cannon, in his “Being Post-Critical,” focuses on Poteat’s brand of post-critical thinking as one that highlights the oral/aural experience, the recovery from the Cartesian abstractions of spatiality for our sense of place, and the recovery of Hebraic metaphors of being, presence and historicity, among other themes. Hall’s “Critical Recollection” redresses the relative lack of attention he thinks Polanyi scholars have given to tradition in the body of our tacit awareness. He finds Poteat “urging us to embrace the radical historical contingency of our mindbody existence” (52).

Bruce Lawrence’s paper, “The Genealogy of Poteat’s Philosophical Anthropology,” traces the origins of Poteat’s doubts about critical reasoning to his doctoral work on Pascal. Pascal awakened him to an alternative to Descartes’ mathematical grasp of the world. What interested Poteat particularly was not so much the epistemological contrast but the cultural one. He observed that taking Descartes seriously has led our intellectual life into a kind of “cultural insanity” that all but obliterates the more rooted (what he would later call “mindbodily”) sensibilities that Pascal celebrated.

Lawrence shows how Poteat’s critique of modernity was honed early in a 1954 review of Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Though he thought Popper came tantalizingly close to appreciating the limits of critical thought, he found Popper oblivious to the more basic reality beyond our explicit grasp. About thirty years later, in his *Polanyian Meditations*, Poteat identifies a similar obliviousness in the similarly “tantalizingly close” approach to rendering the world in language taken by Walter Ong. Ong was interested in the relation between orality and literacy, but what he overlooked according to Poteat was “a latent logos common to my gesturing and speaking that is archaically rooted in my mindbody” (“body language,” as it were).

The focus in “The Primacy of Persons,” by David W. Rutledge, is on the language Poteat uses. It is, admittedly, rhetorically rich, so rich indeed that this reviewer finds that keeping the OED at hand while reading him is half the fun! For some, such a painterly style of writing might suggest affectation, but that is not true in Poteat’s case. It is rather his way of putting us in mind of the pernicious shift language usage suffered in modernity, a shift to forms of truth-telling that are estranged from the mindbodily awareness earlier usage was rooted in. Using words that highlight their own etymology is one way to recapture what was lost when language got “fixed in printed form by reflection” (77). Polanyi placed persons at the center of knowing. Poteat places them in a tradition where speech patterns of pre-literacy are on display in the original meanings of what they say. Such speech-rooted language, he says, “has the sinews of our bodies” (79). Rutledge’s essay, along with several others in this volume, gives us salutary examples of how we can reinstall ourselves in place (rather than space) as the ground of our personal being.

Ronald L. Hall's "Dethroning Epistemology" invites us to consider how Poteat's development as a philosophical anthropologist took a turn that in some respects escapes Cartesian thought more radically than Polanyi did. For the latter, knowing *that* is grounded in knowing *how*, and this insight led him to link ontology to a non-Cartesian account of knowing. While Poteat celebrated this epistemological corrective to critical thought, he eventually came to be skeptical about any ontology rooted in an account of knowing. As Hall puts it, he was awakened "from his epistemic obsession" (86) by an encounter with a Greek sculptor named Evangelos Moustakas. This encounter led him to dethrone epistemology "along with its metaphysical mistress" (91), a move Hall calls "Poteat's most subtle and profound philosophical coup" (91). After that awakening he resisted the inclination to reduce all consciousness to modalities of knowing. Instead, he proffered the Christian concept of the incarnation as positing a radically new way of understanding human existence as personal. What was incarnate was the Word; it is thus language that holds spirit and flesh together in a dialectical tension so as to enable us to mindbodily negotiate our world. The result was to redefine the project of philosophical anthropology as one of "linguistic phenomenology" (87) and to find in the biblical idea that human beings were created *imago Dei* an understanding of the power of speech as analogous to God's creative word.

Poteat chose to teach not in Duke University's philosophy department but in its Divinity School, no doubt for a variety of reasons. Certainly his sense of vocation involved opening up new ways of thinking for future church leaders, but James W. Stine's "Personhood and the Problematic of Christianity" finds in his Christian commitment another prompt for his awareness of the "Cartesian absence of reconciliation between subject and object" (105). He tells us, "'The Christ' symbolizes a unification or reconciliation of the so-called objective and external realm of history and its language of ordinary historical discourse with the subjective or personal and internal realm of language for discourse about profound events or changes and states within ourselves in the realm of freedom" (105). Stines finds the same rejection of the mind/body dualism drawing him to the later Wittgenstein, who "was on the right track in showing how words and world come together" (106). But he thinks it was probably Søren Kierkegaard who most enriched his conceptual alternative to critical thought by insisting that "the truth is not first of all the answer to an objective 'what'; rather, it is first of all in you and me in the 'how' of relation" (107).

Theological debates tend to be conducted in timeworn doctrinal language, and because he did not usually reason in those terms, Poteat was sometimes dismissed by his colleagues as a non-theologian. But Elizabeth Newman, in her "Incarnational Theology," sets that matter straight by pointing out the engagement between two central Christian doctrines—creation *ex nihilo* and the Incarnation—and the core insights of post-critical thinking as Poteat focused them in his reflections on the "mindbody."

By inseparately conjoining the two terms modern philosophy has systematically separated, Poteat makes being and goodness intrinsic to one another, indicating “that logic, orientation, and purpose are integral to all being” (122). This reveals as a conceit the existentialist notion that we shape ourselves in a value-creating way (the value is already there) and allows for the divine action to be in and through incarnate action.

R. Melvin Keiser’s “Toward a Post-Critical Theology” takes up Newman’s question in a slightly different way. He puzzles over the turn Poteat made from his early theological musing (often in response to his work with H. Richard Niebuhr at Yale Divinity School) to his later reluctance to enter into explicitly theological reflections. In a delightful anecdote, he reflects on the humbling experience of being “whacked” (140) by Poteat’s Zen-master technique of catching him up short when his critical habits led him to objectivize religious truth. Perhaps the master saw the primary challenge of disabusing budding young theologians of their habits by getting them to concentrate first and foremost on how radically different post-critical thinking is before they ventured into matters of religious truth. But even when the technique is successful, it leaves unanswered the question of how we are to make first-person, mindbodily faithful claims un beholden to the criteria of critical thinking. Kaiser’s reflections on this topic are deeply personal and highly tentative, but very helpful in getting us to put the question of theology properly.

The hold of dualistic thinking is tenacious, to be sure, and in many fields it remains unchallenged. But Kieran Cashell, in her “Post-Critical Aesthetics,” reminds us how that hold is loosening, not only in philosophy—where Polanyi’s work complements the phenomenological movement in beginning to weaken it—but also in the visual arts. The paintings of Paul Cézanne in particular have been recognized as visualizing the world as it appears without the subject/object dichotomy. Merleau-Ponty, in his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt,” finds in Cézanne “the same kind of direct, primordial contact with quotidian reality that he was using the phenomenological method to describe in his own research” (161). Poteat too, perhaps initially at Merleau-Ponty’s prompting, found in the painter not only a deconstruction of linear perspective—that visual emblem of modernity—but a visual resolution of the problem of dualism. His work seemed to reveal “what it is *like* to see...[and] what it is *like* to feel” (172). Cashell explores Poteat’s fascination with Cézanne “as an agency of *anamnesis* for his project of recollecting the ground of mindbodily being” (179).

Thus she provides us with an introduction to the final essay of the collection, Poteat’s own essay on Cézanne, “Paul Cézanne and the Numinous Power of the Real,” which was his attempt to capture the mysterious hold Cézanne’s paintings had over him. For him, the rupture they represent in the history of painting is parallel to the one post-critical thinking represents in the history of traditional philosophy. Poteat’s challenge is to show how Cézanne’s paintings can convey the *haecceity* of things (their

thisness) as opposed to their *quiddity* (their *whatness*). By the very nature of the task, it is as much evocation as explanation, and this he does in a wide variety of ways—by comparing a camera-eye view of the Grand Canyon with the mindbodily eye-view, by comparing the retinal impressions of the impressionists with how the “sensations of the world of nature offered to its own immanent *logos* clues for a dynamic integration to an oppugnant thisness” (194), and by comparing perspectival presence to the eye with presence “in obedience to *logos* that never loses its dependence upon and fidelity to its radix” (196).

How appropriate that this jewel box of a book should culminate with such a rich example of how Poteat’s language itself, plumbed to its premodern depths, can help us find our way back to where we have been all along, but awakened from the amnesia modernity has fostered in us and refreshed for the tasks of weaning our intellectual world in its many facets from the deadly fixations that threaten to blind it to the obvious.