

Tradition & Discovery

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Preface

This is *TAD's* first thematic edition: Guest Editor Jim Stines has put together a nice collection of essays honoring William H. Poteat, a thinker who has encouraged many generations of students to contemplate Michael Polanyi's work. Stines has more to say about Poteat and those who have written about him below. Two other matters are important to note: (1) David Rutledge describes the upcoming November 18 and 19, 1994 meetings of The Polanyi Society to be held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago (see page 6); (2) this is the beginning of the academic year and annual dues need to be paid (please see the inserted sheet in this issue).

Phil Mullins

Responses to W.H. Poteat: Introduction

J. W. Stines
Guest Editor

The Polanyi Society, in its meeting with the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco in November of 1992 requested that an edition of *Tradition and Discovery* be devoted to the work of William H. Poteat.¹ This issue is the response to that request.

The career of Poteat as teacher and writer is having an increasingly profound impact; and one of the major routes of that impact has been by way of the Polanyi connection. Members of The Polanyi Society and subscribers to *Tradition and Discovery* will recall that conversations with Poteat constituted the Society program at the November, 1993, American Academy of Religion meeting in Washington, D.C. and that, in anticipation of that gathering, *TAD* published, in a 1993-94 issue (Vol. XX, no. 1), R. Taylor Scott's excellent introductory essay "William H. Poteat: A Laudatio". The present issue of *TAD* is something of a continuation and expansion of what was begun there; and that essay is recommended to readers of this issue who might have

Tradition and Discovery is indexed selectively in *The Philosopher's Index* and *Religion One: Periodicals*. Book reviews are indexed in *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*.

missed it.

As titles of a number of Poteat's writings clearly indicate, there has been far more than an incidental relationship between his work and that of Polanyi. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Poteat's work--even where Polanyi is explicitly invoked in such titles as *Polanyian Meditations*--is simply a piece of Polanyi scholarship. Indeed, Poteat has disavowed being a "Polanyi scholar" in the usual academic sense of such expressions; and any reader of Poteat's essays (or of his Ph. D. dissertation on *Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility*) will notice that from the early nineteen fifties, before any affiliation with Polanyi, he was already at work giving expression to a postcritical sensibility possessed of its own genius and, from the beginning, engendered in a highly reflected relationship to the import of the Christian imagination for be-speaking our understanding and for understanding our beings as speakers and listeners. In the introduction to *Polanyian Meditations* Poteat indicates how his 1952 discovery of some early writings of Polanyi "accredited and greatly enriched the context within which initially to obey my own intimations"; and he goes on to describe his initial meeting with Polanyi and the "mounting excitement" with which he read a typescript of *Personal Knowledge* which he took from that meeting in 1955.

Hence, the relationship has been of the most fruitful sort. It is necessary to listen to Polanyi and Poteat each in his own right; and it would be a gross error to expect to meet, in Poteat's work, simply Polanyi's voice or a presumption to that. It is precisely because of this that there is, both actual and possible, the most authentic sort of colloquy between the two. It is a sense for that fact that has led so many of Poteat's students, working within the particular ambience of Poteat's teaching and writing-- and on such diverse themes as Arendt and authority, irony and epistemology, Wittgenstein and religious language, Walker Percy and cultural criticism, etc.--also to enter the world of Polanyi and into a conversation whose end is a continually receding horizon and which takes turns which certainly could not have been foreseen as inferences from a careful reading of Polanyi. Nevertheless, there is a shared elan which, negatively stated, has a close relationship to Soren Kierkegaard's claim that the issue of the modern sensibility is suicide. Positively stated, this elan is surely closely tied to a sense for "the primacy of persons".

It is this latter shared sensibility which will be evident in the following essays in response to Poteat--even where the name of Polanyi is scarcely invoked at all. Indeed, in a rather defiant act of what Kierkegaard termed "dialectical reduplication", Benjamin Ladner posed an instructive problem for the present editing procedure--one which I took to grow directly out of his attempt to be non-complicitous with the ubiquitous subtle subterfuges by which academic scholarship obfuscates the presence and the voice of the speaker. In the present scheme of things in the scholarly publishing world, the indexing of an article and making it available for electronic searches requires the appending of an abstract and "key words". Ladner simply refused this new form of presumption to an abstracted re-presentation of what he, in his own voice, wishes to say. Perhaps the reader will find that this refusal is a statement upon the article and/or that the article is a statement upon the refusal; here, also, perhaps there is a clue to the title of the article--"Who Says What"--minus question mark.

Ladner, Dale Cannon and Bruce Haddox were students of Poteat; and, although their modes of approach vary, each in his essay gives voice, among other things, to a sense for the person as a sense for a presence which is at once inalienable and yet, ironically, becoming utterly inapprehensible within modern and post-modern sensibility. (Cannon's discussion of Kierkegaard's Xenophon seems especially relevant here, as does Haddox's

discussion of Derrida). If this is so, how is this “diagnosis” related to Poteat’s work, and what ways to alternative sensibilities does that work broach? “A Shared Life”; “Modernity Is Bankrupt”; “Who Says What”--can one give a “respectable scholarly response” to these profoundly personal statements without, *ipso facto*, a presumption to personal withdrawal? These writers obviously speak from a context of intellectual passion characterized by belief that they have something worth saying, something to which they personally subscribe. Their response to my claim that this is so would surely be intensely ironic, but not unrelievedly so; for I am confident that none of them would assume the position, without irony, that their personal subscription is irrelevant. Each believes, indeed, quite to the contrary. Are “true believers”, as such, obviously extraneous to “good thinking and good scholarship”?

The essays by E.M. Adams and Walter Meade--clearly, also intensely concerned about a certain cultural despising of the person--are characterized by a different mood. Adams offers both appreciation and critique. He applauds “much of Poteat’s criticism of our cultural situation” and contends that the “modern Western mind is deranged.” However, he holds for a different view of the genesis and resolution of the state of affairs in terms of which we are in thrall “to an intellectual vision of humankind and the world that will not sustain the human spirit or a great civilization.”

Walter Meade, on the other hand--ranging with impressive familiarity over the whole range of Poteat’s writings--has provided a very careful and detailed analysis and exposition of some of the most important specific aspects and difficulties in Poteat’s work. His integrative focus is Poteat’s anthropology.

I wish to express my great personal appreciation to Phil Mullins and The Polanyi Society for encouraging this issue dedicated to making Poteat’s work more widely known and for asking me to assist in its production. Most especially, it has been a happy occasion to experience the enthusiastic complicity of the writers of these, I believe, outstandingly helpful essays.

Endnotes

¹ W.H. Poteat, from 1960 until his retirement in 1987, taught in the religion department at Duke University. The last of the series of titles and positions he held while at Duke was Professor of Religion and Comparative Studies. Prior to 1960 he held teaching positions at Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest and in the philosophy department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His major published works are: *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985); *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990); *Recovering the Ground: A Philosophical Essay in Recollection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming 1994); *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays of William H. Poteat*. Edited with an Introduction by James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993); *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. Edited with Thomas A. Langford (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968).

Contributors To This Issue

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Dale Cannon is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, OR 97361 (Internet address: cannodw@fsa.wosc.osshe.edu). He is currently finishing a book tentatively entitled "Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework to Guide Comparative Studies of Religion" that is due to be published by Wadsworth in August 1995.

Bruce Haddox is Professor of Philosophy and Religion and Chair of the Humanities Division at Simpson College, Indianola, Iowa. He studied with William Poteat at Duke from 1966-69.

Benjamin Ladner was, for more than a decade, President of The National Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Sciences. In the summer of 1994, he assumed a new position as President of the American University in Washington, D. C. Ladner was a graduate student working with William Poteat from 1966-70

Walter B. Mead, a professor of classical political philosophy at Illinois State University (Normal, IL 61790), did his Ph. D. work at Duke under Polanyi-advocate John H. Hallowell from 1960-63; hearing of the intellectual ferment that a young professor in the Religion Department was creating, he occasionally slipped into a corner of William Poteat's seminar room. Author of two books and many articles in normative political philosophy; Mead presented a paper on Plato and Polanyi at the 1992 meeting of The Polanyi Society. His essay in this issue is part of a longer metaphorical analysis of Poteat which is available upon request.

Jim. W. Stines is Professor and former Chairperson of the Department of Philosophy-Religion at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. W. H. Poteat was major professor for his Duke Ph. D. Among his writings are articles in *TAD*; and he is co-editor, with James Nickell, of the collection of Poteat's essays entitled *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture* (University of Missouri Press, 1993). He is currently chairperson of the Philosophy of Religion-Theology Section of the American Academy of Religion, Southeast.

November Polanyi Society Meeting To Be Combined With Visit To Polanyi Special Collection at the Regenstein

The regular meeting of The Polanyi Society held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature will be at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, November 19, 1994 in Conference 4G of the Chicago Hilton and Towers. Polanyi Society members and any other interested persons are invited to attend. The papers to be discussed and schedule are listed below. Since papers will not be read during the session, participants are asked to review papers beforehand; copies are available for \$5.00 from Dr. David Rutledge, Department of Religion, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, SC 29613-0474 (803-294-3296). Free electronic copies may also be made available via the Polanyi Society electronic discussion group (for information on the electronic address, see page 5); if this is possible, complete instructions for FTP will be provided. AAR/SBL members are reminded that the schedule for the meeting is printed in the annual meeting program in the "Additional Meetings" section (p. 166).

Since the meeting is in Chicago, special arrangements have been made with the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago to present a seminar on the Michael Polanyi Special Collection housed at the Regenstein. The seminar will be held Friday, November, 18, 1994 from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. at the Regenstein in the Special Collections Seminar Room. Both an express bus and the Illinois Central run from the area of the Chicago Hilton and Towers to Hyde Park (within walking distance of the Regenstein). All scholars interested in Polanyi's work are invited to attend.

Polanyi Society Meeting
Saturday, November 19, 1994 9:00---11:30 a.m.
Chicago Hilton Conference Room 4G

9:00 a.m. David Rutledge, Furman University, Presiding

Ira H. Peak, Jr. Jefferson Community College
Multiculturalism and Intellectual Freedom: A Polyanian Analysis

Respondent: Bruce Haddox, Simpson College

Barbara Bennett Baumgarten, Santa Paula, CA
A Theology of Embodiment

Respondent: Phil Rolnick, Greensboro College

11:30 a. m. Business Meeting

Who Said What

Benjamin Ladner

My way of approaching the task of commenting upon the meaning/significance of William H. Poteat's work (or certain aspects of it) is not, I think, philosophically astute; nor, I hasten to add, do I intend it to be. Indeed, I accept as unfaillingly, even inescapably, definitive the irresistibly bewitching yet implacably insidious preconditions imposed by modernity and which attend any published reflections upon another's reflections even (perhaps especially) when those reflections [Poteat's] resolutely, defiantly, undercut the reflective legitimacy that is acritically presupposed by the production of a series of articles that together may unwittingly disguise a self-assured immunity tacitly conferred by professional sanctions that are themselves upheld by the intellectual predispositions that inhere in this or any other academic journal. Mere dissent is beside the point. Taking up the pen is itself an act of complicity. And yet.

I wish to focus upon the process of being addressed by William H. Poteat through his writings, and to do so by confronting a tension occasioned by engaging a double rubric. First, in coming to terms with the significance of Poteat's reflective corpus, we must rely upon what he has actually done that has issued in his work in order to understand the meaning of what he has done; and further, I will claim, we can confidently rely upon this "what" to understand who has done it.

Second, what Poteat has done is to try to bring to self/other-consciousness, through the convention of public utterance, who he is--however much this act may appear to be subsumed under the jealous perquisites of literacy--and he has done this deliberately and responsibly as a transparent, recognizable act. At the same time, in and by means of this process, he has tried to reconstitute the enterprise of comprehension itself and the dynamic of personal speech-action-reflection so that it becomes not only more accessible but also irresistible for modern professional and lay "thinkers," and to do this as an expression of who he, in particular, is--to, in other words, reconstitute himself, becoming "the upsurge of time" (Merleau-Ponty) through the act of remarking upon its (his) unfolding as a way of ushering us into the realization that such an enterprise can itself be one of the most fulfilling of human undertakings, leading, perhaps, to a form of self-possession.

In the process, he has not only made less opaque what we think we already know about the modern predicament as it has been defined within the framework of a ubiquitous, Enlightenment-inspired rationality--which definition, Poteat is careful to point out, is itself (under the guise of clarity) fundamentally opaque, lodged, as it is, imperceptibly within the spawning grounds of what we have come to identify as "common sense," "natural," and merely obvious; he has also made a genuine discovery of the irreducible, integral source and character of the personal, both in its unique, primordially coextensive worldly appearance and as a mode of understanding "self" and "world" (for the benefit of his readers), as well as a mode of understanding himself, which, at the same time, is fundamentally, perhaps transformationally, constitutive of himself.

I contend that in order for us to know the full meaning of what he has said and goes on saying in his writings, it is vitally important for us to come to understand William H. Poteat as he understands himself through the process of joining his/our worldly coinherence through personal utterance.

What is distracting, not to say disturbing, about this claim is that it violates our near-dogmatic convictions that, (a) one need not understand the writer to understand his work, (b) it is not really possible to understand (certainly not fully) another person under any circumstance, and (c) to attempt to do so is to abandon the strict and reliable claims of rationality which, we have come to believe, are the touchstones of understanding, and, instead, to embark on an ill-fated trek along the slippery slopes of conjecture and psychological projection, or, at the very least, to wander into a thicket of linguistic description that is essentially meaningless and bereft of recourse to verification.

Moreover, this claim puts special pressure on our inherited tendencies to engage both the act and the concept of understanding. However, understanding is not itself necessarily problematic, nor does its power unfailingly emerge at the point of what is posed as a problem not yet understood, although it is intractably rooted in what is essentially ambiguous and unspecifiable, which is the ground of the personal, and as such is a precondition of understanding.

It is also helpful to remember that understanding is accessible, as both act and comprehension, however much we may pretend that real understanding--especially of another person--is fundamentally difficult and ultimately unreliable. Under the sway of such pretensions, we are condemned to struggle to employ our powers of comprehension stripped of the conditions for their realization. Little wonder there is common-sense agreement that seeking understanding of someone through what he has written is futile, while understanding the meaning of what is written by someone can be achieved by the reader's dealing with the work as a kind of hermetically sealed thing-in-itself. Indeed, the measure of the integrity of the work is assumed to correspond precisely to the extent of its radical disaffiliation from the person of the writer. And, by extension, the integrity of the reader's engagement with the work is thought to be established in the act of submitting to the authority of this distinction.

Both Poteat and Polanyi have emphasized time and again that to engage in acts of understanding is to take up/surrender to a process of indwelling, commitment, conviviality, etc., in which one not only can be, but must be, fully invested personally, and, after all, that this personal transaction is what understanding is. The difficulty of fully endorsing this account of understanding in the late twentieth century can hardly be overstated, and has a direct bearing upon such apparently unrelated items as the existence of dysfunctional families, the structure and content of university curricula, the routine failure of diplomatic initiatives among warring nations, and Walker Percy's haunting question, "Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century?"

Only through an enormous feat of deception perpetrated by us upon ourselves have we been able to sustain a passionate, largely unquestioned belief in a set of highly abstract conditions that are as unattainable as they are irresistible, but which continue to sanction our reflection about reflection, our understanding of understanding, and our assumptions and claims about the meaning of meaning.

At the very least, we all bear self-inflicted wounds from this somatic/reflective infidelity, susceptible as we are, if only in fleeting moments, to the bitter residue of perpetually reconstructed identities, to the addictive pleasures of trendy forms of nihilism, to the stark paralysis of encapsulating self-consciousness, to the cold sweats brought on by this afternoon's brush with solipsism, to the confounding irrationality of passion, and to the monotone confession secretly shared with mistresses and analysts of a profound, insatiable longing--a longing to become what we think, to see what we read, to hear what is said, unimpeded by the disconcerting intrusion of any who, capable of we know not what: an ambiguous gesture, a quizzical glance, a warm smile, a non-committal response, a name, a naked

embrace--leaving us troubled at the uncertainty of not knowing what to think. At most, we long to be freed altogether of the unbearable strain of existing in what we feel certain is a gap between being and knowing, and to blow wind-like through the world, through worlds, unencumbered--Sartrean spooks, out of our minds.

Recovering our powers of understanding as instruments for recovering ourselves can be an extraordinary, almost impossible, task, especially when the intention is, as it is for Poteat, to attend to the music and the musician by attending to the instrument while creating a new melody which, as it is being played, changes the musician and the instrument. What Poteat knows in and through the act of writing what he has, is that the form of understanding we moderns have embraced and seek to enact in our quest to understand ourselves and the world is, at its core, diseased, however disguised and even celebrated it has become as health. He knows, too, (and this is even more daunting for his task) that the first move in such an enterprise of "self"-reflection and recovery is apt to be a false one.

What, then, might we understand, both about understanding and about who Poteat is, from what he has written, given that we are culturally and individually predisposed to attempt to understand what he is saying, and to dismiss what he is saying, by employing strategies to eliminate the conditions required for understanding? And must the task really be so linguistically tortuous and conceptually tedious as Poteat's writings seem to make it?

The regnant, definitive "categories" of understanding, (stemming largely from unformulated presuppositions) that are permitted to dictate our speech about understanding do not simply make it more difficult to speak and be understood; they, in fact, sever the fundamental connection between language and understanding by the simple move of dismissing the speaker/writer as being no more than a necessary assumption which can, indeed must, be discounted in order to understand what is being said. That is why upon first reading Poteat we are likely to think that what he is saying/writing can perhaps be taken seriously and approached directly (and certainly could be reduced to simpler, more straightforward language), but that, in any case, the question of who he is--were we to bother to consider it at all--could only be imagined. With this simple, familiar move at the outset of picking up the text of any of Poteat's writings, we imagine being able to dismiss the constitutive element of his language in order to come to terms with what ("literally") is being said.

By contrast, Poteat's sustained fidelity to his own words--inescapably and self-consciously self-implicating--that is embedded in the act of formulating the possibility for and conditions of understanding, enables him to reveal both the ground and goal of understanding. The ground, we understand, is pre-reflective, ambiguous, somatic, which is at no point separable from the goal, which is not clarity, but undertaking and extending the process of giving formulation through the irrevocably personal act of receiving what is given, and thereby expressing one's self in language, which, to be sure, can be more or less abstract, linguistically convoluted, perhaps even remote and inaccessible--indeed, is bound to be when inserted into conventional, theoretical frameworks of codification.

What is heard/read/understood by the listener/reader is, though ordinarily subsidiary, also personal, and as such is part of--a formative, essential part of--what is meant by Poteat. The act of appropriating-by-relying-upon what is subsidiary is not primarily psychological. It is distinctly personal; it is definite; it is reliable.

Moreover, what is said has been uttered/written not by “someone-in-general” [of which, incidentally, there are no examples, and could not be--though it is customary to pretend there could be when we give accounts of our efforts to understand what we are reading], but by William H. Poteat. Likewise, what has been said has been heard by someone in particular: me. Who he is within this speaker-word-hearer or writer-text-reader meaning-nexus cannot, of course, be simply equated with or subsumed under his ideas, or mine. He is never reducible to what we think about him or to thoughts of his own he may express, even about himself. Yet, his ideas are what they are, convey the meaning they do, take the expressive form they do, by virtue of being his. Indeed, there can be no ideas he expresses in speaking or writing that are not formulations of himself in such a way that who he is is intractably embedded in what we hear or read.

Therefore, to understand this unfolding of meaning in what he has written is to understand this unfolding of himself, and to know, in some sense, who he is (which should not be confused with anything else we may come to know or imagine about him). In what sense? In the sense that it really is Poteat who has said what he has. Authorship, then, is grounded in personal identity. Linguistic expression is a radical disclosure both of meaning and of the author of meaning--of the person who owns, stands within, and authorizes his words.

Our highly sophisticated habit of not attending to this fact is more than a momentary failure to notice a seemingly unremarkable aspect of the irrelevantly obvious. In fact, in each instant of its enactment, this habit re-inflicts our unique ontological impairment: we become deaf and dumb (in both senses). As a result, our words, like our lives, become weightless and without authority.

The personal transaction/engagement I am commenting upon cannot be reduced to a component [the “personal”] which is subsumed under another, higher order of comprehension that has prior claims upon our powers of reflection. My own hearing/reading is itself an expression of the shared world of language, culture, experience, etc., that becomes part of the transaction--a world constituted by personal presence that makes understanding possible. It is never neutral, and could not be. It is always a personal transaction fraught with the uneven, unpredictable edges of ambiguity which undergird and make possible all speech-acts. Without this ambiguity, of course, we could never achieve the definiteness of meaning we do.

Furthermore, understanding who Poteat is through what he has written/said can never be separated from what he has written/said and meant. That is the crux of, and constitutes the situation of, addressing and being addressed. Who he is, after all, is the author of these words. Who I hear in his words is not just “Poteat” as a theoretically projected “source” of written language. Who I hear is actually who he is. What I understand by reading what he has written is not shaped merely by stylistic eccentricities or personal characteristics revealed in writing; his words and their meanings are actually upheld, and become what they are fully capable of as bearers of significance, by the personal backing of the man himself. Otherwise, his authorship could have no authority, no claim to meaning at all.

I once observed Poteat take humorous advantage of this arresting circumstance of our not being able to separate entirely who he is from what he has written, as he signed one of his books for an admiring reader. “Best wishes to Sandy,” he wrote, and signed it, “William H. Poteat,” followed by the date. Then he wrote underneath, “Note: I hereby attest that the above signature is actually that of William H. Poteat,” and signed again, “William H. Poteat,” followed by the date. Underneath that he added: “Honest. William H. Poteat,” and the date.

This curious circumstance, which is the circumstance of our embodied, worldly lives, is why the unpardonable sin in human experience is willful duplicity, calculated deception--the effort to cancel my appearance in my own words by means of my words; to separate myself from my expression of myself; to become disembodied, discarnate; pretending to survey the discordant irrationalities of worldliness from an imagined position outside the ravages of time and place.

It is a sin that serious readers and thinkers in the late twentieth century--many of whom bask in the glow of (we suppose) an admiring public eager to pay us so to read and think--are specially tempted to commit, by entertaining, if only for a moment and probably for the fun of it, that irresistible, smiling seducer: Irony, who remains eternally at large, hovering wind-like above world-bound endeavors, awaiting the imperceptible signal of our desire--then, suddenly, filling, filling, filling the yawning, deepening crevasse we had intended (did we intend?) to scoop out ever so slightly between ourselves and our words.

And it is also why John Macmurray once observed: "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship." Fortunately (else Poteat would not have bothered to write anything at all), we can come to ourselves, can choose what is already given, can be emboldened to utter what only we can say, can turn and embrace what all our lives has felt like what we were being pursued by, only to find, in turning, we have always been in its embrace--have we but ears to hear. I know this. My friend, Bill Poteat, told me.

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 doublespaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. 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.

Manuscripts should include the author's name on a separate page since submissions normally will be sent out for blind review. In addition to the typescript of a manuscript to be reviewed, authors are expected to provide an electronic copy (on either a 5.25" or 3.5" disk) of accepted articles; it is helpful if original submissions are accompanied by a disk. ASCII text as well as most popular IBM word processors are acceptable; MAC text can usually be translated to ASCII. Be sure that disks include all relevant information which may help converting files to Word Perfect or ASCII. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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Meditations On The Shared Life

Bruce Haddox

ABSTRACT: Key words: presence, deconstruction, mindbodily inherence, coinherence.

This paper examines the dominant Western image of Being as presence. It then explores William Poteat's alternative picture of our mindbodily inherence in a world and its relevance for a more adequate understanding of our lived existence.

Two summers ago, my father died. One Sunday afternoon, his heart erupted, then shut down. It was all too sudden. I remember the hurried, but failed attempt to arrive at his hospital bed before it was too late, the zombie-like activities of the days that followed, the immense sadness that permeated the duties of the ensuing weeks and months. Even now, as I remember those times, the clouds reassemble.

During these two years following my father's death, I have become aware of something that is at once mysterious and obvious—mysterious because I do not know exactly what to make of it, obvious because there is no doubt about it—namely, that my father is with me even more profoundly than he was before he died.

Now, of course, much has been made of this phenomenon in both psychological and religious circles, and I do not wish to either agree or argue here with those projects. They are serious and important projects, but they are not central to my point. The point I want to make is that this recognition of my father's presence to me (perhaps in me, certainly with me), has profound philosophical importance for my thinking about anything at all and especially when thinking about subjects like “thinking” or “knowing” or “being.”

I should say at the start that I look like my father. I mean here something at once straightforward and equivocal, namely that my father and I not only share certain physical characteristics noticeable to anyone, but also that I look at things the way my father did. It is this phenomenon that I have begun to notice more acutely during the last two years. Here, the issue is not similarity of perception, but a kind of embodiment in a particular presence or, perhaps, a particular practice. The life of my father, his gestures, his intonations, his way with the world, his venturing out and withdrawal from, all of these and more, are mine, in a real, yet unclear, sense. It is as though I carry on, not just for him, but with him.¹

As I just said, this is both obvious to me as I sit here writing/thinking/knowing/being, and mysterious to me as I flounder about trying to comprehend what I sense to be true. All of this, of course, needs a great deal of elaboration and I am mindful of that fact. This essay is at least an attempt, an exercise in that direction.

II

Write an essay on the implications of Bill Poteat's thought. That is what the voice of the caller from North Carolina said. And I, at once surprised, flattered and frightened, said uncomprehendingly All right, I will. And now here I am, in my office late at night, thinking about my father's death two years ago. Is this diversion? Inspiration? Desperation? Yes, it is.

I remember vividly my first classroom encounter with Bill Poteat, as a first-year grad student at Duke. We were in the midst of some mystifying discussion of Either/Or and he walked up to me, pointed me out, and asked me to identify myself as clearly as I could. With what I thought was a good amount of philosophical sophistication, I gave a fairly extensive Strawson-like answer, making sure that whatever behavioral, physico-chemical and personal predicates involved were applied to the one subject occupying this and only this spatio-temporal location. Poteat listened patiently, dropped his arm, stared at me for a long moment, and said: Haddox, is that really who you are? It was a question that did not seem to ask for an answer, but only for a hearing. It was a profound moment in my education and I have never forgotten it. It was the beginning of my learning from Bill Poteat the radical nature of thinking about ourselves, of trying to recapture our ability to think and act as beings in the world, rather than as isolated minds in objectified bodies with explicitly knowable pasts, presents and futures. In other words, I began, that day, under the tutelage of Bill Poteat and with my fellow students, to explore the nature of our modern orientation which made my abstract and totally theoretical answer to his question seem appropriate at the time.

I remember all this, twenty-seven years later, rocking in my office, with my father's ironic smile on my face.

III

“What is, is,” wrote Parmenides, and “What is not, is not.” Western philosophical thought resonates to the sound of those words. Indeed, the dominant discussion of Being is a discussion of this is-ness, this determinate, timeless, totally present state of being. Such a rendering of is-ness became the model for the metaphysics of the self in classical Western thought early on, Heidegger argued, when the distinction between Being and beings was forgotten and the Being (is-ness) of beings became the issue of Being.² Certainly this abstract notion of what it means to be is taken to be paradigmatic in both Plato and Aristotle and is given a privileged status within the context of describing the nature of things. The issue of change, important as it might be, is discussed in the light of Being as what it is, and the conception of Being as pure presence, essence, logos, becomes the dominant and determining lens through which many later Christian philosophers theoretically interpret theological claims.

This metaphysical picture of a-temporal and unambiguous presence was wholeheartedly embraced in modern thought also. Descartes presents himself as one who is present to himself in the state of pure intuition. In so doing, he took that notion into isolation. All philosophers who followed him, no matter what kind of spin they put on the attendant issues, took up that basic metaphysical picture of the be-ing of everything.³ And even though Kant no longer renders the Being of self as substance, but subject, substance having become a category of the understanding, he nevertheless accepts self (whether the knowing self of the first Critique or the doing self of the second) as that which is. None of these philosophers, however, can hold a candle to Hegel, who manages to produce a philosophy of change including everything actual and possible, within the picture of presence. It is his logocentrism that Heidegger primarily attacks.

Thus, in the West it seems not an oversimplification to say that we think about ourselves such that to be is to be what one is. Change, wherever it occurs, is to be explained in terms of or in the light of an unchanging, rock-bottom base, whether that base be substance, subject, person, mind, speaker or object. Of course, this is not only problematic for whatever historical or philosophical study I might be engaged with, it essentially distills me from my actual life, it casts me into the realm of being as presence, which means I am no longer incarnate in a body-world.⁴ All pasts, insofar

as they are real, are present and all futures, insofar as they are possibilities, are potential presents. Indeed, the dominance of presence as the framework for our thinking about our world, is undeniable.

It is this privileged picture for thinking about being, that Jacques Derrida addresses and attempts to deconstruct. Of course, Derrida's writings are relevant for a number of enterprises and they have been the source of much controversy partly because of their challenge to the metaphysical picture discussed above. In his famous essay "Differance,"⁵ Derrida presents an alternative entry into our discussion. Instead of privileging presence or identity or sameness, Derrida makes the observation that every notation of what is, is not dependent on a recognition of what is not, as would be the case in the classical tradition. Rather, such notation is dependent on noting its difference from something else. Difference seems to be the hermeneutical principle here, not identity nor an "in-itself presence." Derrida introduces this procedure with the word "differance," a word that contains in its different spelling the very meaning conveyed. We note the is-ness of "differance" by its difference from "difference," and that exactly is the point of differance as a way of proceeding to analyze the meaning of texts or issues. Just as the meaning of a playing card in a deck is determined by its differentiation from the other cards, so is the meaning of everything. Differance, not identity, not being-what-it-is, is the key. And differance is never what it is; it cannot be in that sense. Indeed, differance deconstructs the metaphysics of Being, displaying the falsity of privileging the presence of Being. This is because every time anything is posited as it is (whether it be myself, God or the world), differance sets it within a context where the recognition that it is, is itself a recognition of its difference from something to which it is connected. The interplay of identity and difference, driven by differance, subverts is-ness, then, as the primitive, rock-bottom characteristic of Being.

It is important to note here that in this essay, Derrida does not posit differance as something that is. Neither is it an action done by somebody who is. Differance, rather, is a play of differences.⁶ As Derrida writes:

... differance is not. It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of differance, but differance instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach differance with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter.⁷

This passage is troubling for several reasons, not the least among them being that the critic of Derrida wishes so badly to accuse him of deconstructing privileged positions from a privileged position of his own. But such a critique will not do, at least not for the purpose of mere dismissal. The subversion of every kingdom, the renunciation of capital letters, may present a significant challenge for us, but no easy dismissal of Derrida, which suggests he is just like everyone else, is possible. Surely Derrida is correct in suggesting that differance offers us a different way of handling the issues than did the being-as-presence approach. The question is whether differance is de-throner only or whether by its peculiar non-stance stance, it demands an alternative way to build a different kind of kingdom. Clearly, if the only way to think about be-ing is in terms of the Greek picture of presence, then Derrida has a point in his deconstruction. The privileging of being-as-it-is has no metaphysical significance. It is a chosen option which has no grounding except in choice. On this perspective, Derrida and company seem to many to be the end of a long historical project, the Western metaphysical project beginning with the Greeks and ending with modernity. We have, as they say, moved into post-modernity.

IV

There is, of course, another way to think of ourselves. It is an ancient way, presented narratively within the Hebrew scriptures where humans are displayed as beings called into existence and embedded in a divine-human history. As such, they are never what they are, but always both less and more. More precisely, they are something else altogether.

The classic story of God's revelation of divine being is the story of Moses and the burning bush. A voice speaks to Moses out of the fire and tells him of his mission to Egypt. He is to bring Israel to the land of promise. Before accepting the mission, however, Moses asks for the voice's name. Instead of giving a name, the voice replies I am who I am or I will be who I will be or, to be precise, both of these as inseparable, since what is given is first-person form of presentation. In place of a name, God gives Moses the first-person pronoun, something only God can use to present divine being. Moses certainly cannot use it and neither can any of us, unless we radically alter it and pretend that it is the name of something to which we are referring. But if we are true to the narrative, we can never legitimately do that, for the story introduces God as Yahweh, the one who can never be fully spoken about and certainly not fully thought about. Yahweh is both present to Moses and transcendent of him. As such, Yahweh is not the One in terms of which the many is to be understood, as in Greek metaphysics. Yahweh is the other, the different (differ-ing one), who is present in the midst of an historical encounter. As such, Yahweh is addressed in response, not thought about in theories. Yahweh is re-collected in story, not thought about in theory, for in story Yahweh's encounter is re-presented and re-enacted whereas theoretical representation necessarily re-casts all this into third-person, object language. The centrality of this Biblical narrative, displaying Yahweh and the people of covenant, to the philosophical task becomes apparent when we notice that in the narrative there is a requirement for participants to be hearers and speakers. Moses cannot think Yahweh, nor can he put Yahweh into words. Yahweh's reality is displayed in the confrontation with his word, by hearing, and in responding to that word, by speaking. And Moses reality is what it is in the ongoing conversation with Yahweh and the people. Here, there is no self apart from or abstracted out of the lived concrete experience of the story.

This same truth is deepened in the prophetic tradition later on. The prophets know that no talk of the presence of God or the identity of God's people is licit apart from the concrete reality being lived out in terms of the covenant. The noise of solemn assemblies means nothing without justice being practiced, and pious words about God do not have weight. What is real are our actions before God, for humans exist only before God, and the truth of our existence is always embodied in the story of our many ways of hearing/speaking within the lived experience of God's world.

This is part of what I take Bill Poteat to mean when he writes of a major difference between himself and Heidegger: “. . . even though Heidegger and I both have have aspired to undermine the western philosophic tradition by excavating through its layers to a radical bedrock, he and I find that bedrock to be something profoundly different: for him, so I've heard, being disclosed through Dasein; for me a speaker before Yahweh.”⁸

It is clear here that Poteat, in his work, takes the Hebrew rendition of reality to have utmost philosophical significance, not for ideological or apologetic reasons, but because it provides an alternative to the dualism of modern thought and because it allows for a radical philosophical analysis of our embodied, lived experience. As he writes:

We share, I think, our mutual, thoroughly anti-romantic, anti-gnostic, discovery, won in our convivially agonistic way from the Enlightenment that is in our very bones, that we are rooted in the world, that all our thought is generated out of and continually refers back to our mindbodily inherence here and that the power of thought to rise to the challenge of reality is authorized and grounded in this best of all places—and nowhere else.⁹

Mindbodily inherence takes its meaning within an altogether different way of thinking about ourselves than Greek metaphysics or Enlightenment dualism does. Thought is never merely thought about something, with the act of my thinking bracketed out, but thought is an emergent act from an embodiment in a world, a history, a body. Thus all talk of presence, absence, identity and difference are really abstractions from the concrete reality I am living. The radical nature of the philosophic task is to explore the meaning of our concreteness without slipping into abstractions that become reified into objects and taken to be the real contents of our knowledge.

V

The enduring contribution of Bill Poteat's work, both as teacher and author, is his passionate and uncompromising development of post-critical thought so that the meaning of concrete existence can be better understood and accredited in our thinking. Poteat always insisted that Michael Polanyi's work was much more than most academic circles gave it credit for being. For them, Polanyi presented an interesting point about scientific achievement, namely, that it was the result of the passionate pursuit of scientists. Poteat always saw much more. Indeed, in his introduction to *Intellect and Hope*, entitled “Upon First Sitting down to read *Personal Knowledge*,” he notices that the task of reading *Personal Knowledge* is, itself, of philosophical interest because the task Polanyi sets before himself and us is nothing less than a reconsideration of ourselves in the world. No mere straight-forward reading of the text is possible, then. Indeed Poteat argues, a Polanyian achievement by the reader is the necessary condition for the text to convey its meaning.¹⁰

In that initial warning, Poteat alerted his readers and students to the fact that something radical was afoot here, that this is no mere addition to the philosophical corpus. If Michael Polanyi was correct in his analysis of knowing as a personal act and if his analysis of the from-to structure of that action was accurate, then the whole philosophical enterprise from Descartes on had to be re-considered carefully and systematically.

Polanyi argued that all knowing, from the simplest achievement of tool-using to the most abstract intellectual enterprise, was the result of an indwelling by a person. Indeed the analysis of the range of this indwelling is part of the genius of *Personal Knowledge*. For example, as I write this sentence and you, the reader, attend to my words, we both do so by dwelling in, quite specifically, a particular body, history, culture, language, and present and future orientations. I do not have these things, as Gabriel Marcel pointed out so well,¹¹ I am them. Yet, Polanyi shows us, I am them in a certain way, within a certain structure. I dwell in them, not for the purpose of being who I am, but for the purpose of attending to the world. I attend from my body, history, language, etc., by dwelling in them, in order to pursue meaning, achieve knowledge, perform skills, or think. As anyone at all familiar with Polanyi knows, his work is a careful and ingenious analysis and description of the nature of our embodiment in all the different aspects of our world.

Now, of course, it is obvious that Polanyi's claim about us is diametrically opposed to the picture we have inherited from the modern philosophical tradition. Indwelling there was the source of our ignorance, not the necessary condition of our knowing. As such, it is to be downplayed and if possible, avoided. The genius of Cartesian method was that it constructed a way for us to imagine the knowing situation where absolutely certain, explicit knowledge would be achieved and the ambiguity of indwelling would not be a factor. Furthermore, this method was consistent with the western philosophical tradition's dominant metaphysic of Being. *Cogito* replaced Form or Substance as the image of Being, but the nature of being, the is-ness of Parmenides, remained ever-present. Thus, the explicit character of knowledge in modern thought remains consistent with the explicit rendition of the metaphysics of the self. The major difficulties with this enterprise, as every student of philosophy knows, is that such a rendition cannot itself stand up to the critical analysis demanded by Descartes himself. In spite of his effort to achieve strict objectivity, defined as the opposite of indwelling, Descartes and his successors were caught with their assumptions showing and the metaphysical House of Cards fell. But the rationale for and the blueprint of that building remains.

Certainly such is the case with Jacques Derrida. As I wrote earlier, Derrida's deconstruction of being as presence is understandable from a certain point of view. He argues that presence cannot be absolutely privileged, since difference is a function of any achievement of meaning. But difference as such cannot be pinned down. It builds no kingdom, as Derrida noted, and so one can never settle on a primary meaning or an intention of the author. There is only a play of meanings, an interaction, an esthetic moment.

This argument (or is it playful encounter?) carries him into his discussion with John Searle over speech-act theory, where he suggests that it is impossible to speak of an author of anything. There is always a company or collective author.¹² As one reads his description, there can be no doubt that much of what he says is true, but why does he draw conclusions which are so counter-intuitive to any of us every time we sit down to read, to attend to, the meaning of a text?

I think the answer lies somewhere in that image used above about the blueprint for the fallen House of Cards. Derrida rightly deconstructs the Greek metaphysics of Being as presence, but his picture of knowing is such that he cannot deal with presence in any other way than Parmenides did.

Bill Poteat writes in his Philosophical Daybook about Derrida: "For me to remark difference, that is the complementary simultaneous absence and presence of meaning in any given sign, it is necessary for both the absence and presence to be in some sense unequivocally simultaneously present —to me here and now, rooted in my lively mindbody in the world, actually remarking this difference."¹³

Poteat's point is obviously correct, so why does Derrida not see it? Perhaps the answer is to be found in Poteat's phrase about meaning being present in some sense. Both the absence and presence, the is-ness and the difference, is present to me in some sense. But in what sense? Clearly, not in the sense of what it means to be present to me within the metaphysics of Being, for then difference would be a trivial issue, a mere preliminary to the real event. Surely, meaning is present to me, in Poteat's sense, in a different manner. Here Polanyi must be recognized as informing Poteat's and my understanding. Meaning is present to me in the manner of achievement or discovery by indwelling, rather than in the manner of intuition. The presence of difference is itself achieved by indwelling. Here, as Poteat argues, a different image is necessary to enable our imagination to work constructively. Because Derrida's epistemology or picture of knowledge is the traditional, Cartesian visual one, he has no way of imagining presence in any other sense than in the

Greek tradition and he ends in a jazzed-up, contemporary version of Humean skepticism.

I mention this because Michael Polanyi's re-thinking of ourselves as actual knowers in the world, his reconstruction of epistemology, helps us take Derrida's critique of traditional metaphysics seriously without committing us to a total rejection of all metaphysical thinking. Yet Polanyi's reconstruction is a wrenching experience. It catches us unawares and at every hand. Taking it seriously, we notice how easily we fall into the objectivist outlook. As Bill Poteat says, the Enlightenment is in our bones.

I am very much aware of all this as I sit here writing. As I follow the elusive meaning of a Polyanian or Poteatian clue and attempt to rely upon it for further discovery, I recognize the real possibility of casting the entire enterprise into what Bill Poteat has called "The Theatre of Solitude,"¹⁴ that location of self within itself located in the visual space of the modern project, and thereby losing it all in mere thought. To have been taught by Bill Poteat and to have been schooled by his writings in some manner every year since graduate school, is to be reminded that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against something much more difficult. This is part of the reason for the great adulation Poteat enjoys (or endures) from his students. His is no small vision, his battle no skirmish.

On the other hand, Bill Poteat does more than awaken us from dogmatic slumbers and interpret to us the significance of Michael Polanyi. In his own careful, sometimes difficult, always brilliant way, he describes and analyzes the manner of our embodiment in the world, our incarnation. His discourses on our mindbodily existence brings me to myself in ways resonant to my actual life. As I read his *Polyanian Meditations* or *Philosophical Daybook*, I do so with the resonance of that question still there, seeking a hearing: "Haddox, is that who you really are?"

VI

Two years ago my father died, and yet I know he is with me all the time—most times quietly, sometimes in the bark of a laugh or a gesture of the arms, always a bit tense and impatient. Is this just Freudian rhetoric or, worse, a sign of weakened sensibility? I do not think so. I simply know that I am not who I am by myself, alone, sharing only accidentally a life with others while preserving them through my ideas or memories. I am in others, with them, and they in and with me. We are bound together, inextricably conjoined, so that "I" and "you" are but achievements from a more fundamental "we."

If I understand embodiment and indwelling at all, they at least mean that I am in the world, in my body, in the history of the connectedness with my father, mother, grandparents. I emerged from my shared life with them, as Polanyi would say, by assimilating the particulars of that shared world to myself and attending from them to my own particular tasks. Without the ability to do this I would not be I at all.

I must remember that any thought of myself separated from my dwelling in the shared life with my father (and many others) throws me back into Bill Poteat's theatre of solitude, the Cartesian picture of the *Cogito*, where all shared indwelling becomes ideas of the mind or experiences of the psyche. But such thoughts are not about me, the one addressed by Poteat years ago and called upon to speak, but are of a mere shadow, a spectre, a discarnate one. For such a "one," my father becomes either a memory, an aspect of my existence, or a part of a world separate from me, a fact. Haddox, is that who you really are? I think not.

Here, now, as I sit in my office considering all these things (including Bill Poteat), there is no dualism of self and world, no mind thinking of the other as idea. There is coinherence of myself and the world I dwell in and attend from. It includes far more than I can say, but certainly central to its shape is my father and crucial to it is Bill Poteat, who both coinheres with his students and stirs within them the hunger for further exploration of what this all means.

Endnotes

¹I am reminded of Gabriel Marcel's profound discussion of the mystery of Being in which he notes that *Esse est co-esse*.

²Martin Heidegger, The Anaximander Fragment in *Early Greek Thinking*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 50.

³Hume is the most interesting of these moderns because in the Appendix to the *Treatise on Human Nature*, he seems to be aware of the problematic nature of this picture, the unassimilability of self to being as presence. He at once accepts the picture as the only game in town and rejects it with a philosophical shrug of the shoulders.

⁴This point will be elaborated later on in the paper.

⁵Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 1-27.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 15

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 21-2

⁸Letter to James Stines, April 2, 1987, pp. 1-2

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

¹⁰Poteat, Wm H. and Langford, Thomas A. *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. Durham, N.C.: Duke U. Press, p. 18

¹¹Marcel, Gabriel. *Being and Having*, New York: Harper and Row, 1965

¹²Derrida, Jacques, *Limited Inc*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 36

¹³Poteat, William H. *A Philosophical Daybook*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, p. 60

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.11

Haven't You Noticed That Modernity Is Bankrupt?

Ruminations On The Teaching Career of William H. Poteat¹

Dale Cannon

ABSTRACT Key words: modernity, teaching, spiritual formation, modern critical tradition, post-critical.

This paper essays an account of William H. Poteat's teaching--both what he taught and how he taught--as an effort to bring his students to a realization of the bankruptcy of the modern critical sensibility and help them negotiate a transition to a post-critical intellectual sensibility. Enigmatic aspects of his teaching become intelligible through considering them in light of traditional disciplines of spiritual formation.

The following remarks are offered as ruminations. The word “ruminant” refers to the chewing of cud, regurgitated food that has already once been chewed, in order to further its digestion. The metaphor is apt in several respects. First, the rather informal thoughts that I will be sharing are ones that have been chewed over before--many times in fact, and this will not be the last time they are chewed, by me at least. You may not find them fully digested yet either. In any case my remarks make no pretension to approach a definitive comment on even part, let alone all, of Bill Poteat’s teaching. Second, cud that is chewed is not just food taken in from without but food mixed with one’s own digestive juices. And so these ruminations I offer, though they are meant to represent the work of someone else, just as much reflect my own thinking and its digestive juices and what I have made my own through working with Bill. Third, animals that chew cud--ruminants, they are called--seem to enjoy chewing cud together with others of the same species, rather than by themselves. So, I invite you to chew right along with me.

To start off: when, in the following, I speak of modernity or the modern intellectual sensibility, I will be referring to a set of interconnected ways of going about making sense of the world that germinated in late Medieval Europe, sprouted in the Renaissance and Reformation, and reached full flower in the seventeenth century. They eventually came, as you know, to inspire several generations’ hope in the prospect of the infinite perfectibility of humanity and society in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. And, despite apparent disillusionment with them in the twentieth century, they remain essentially intact and fully entrenched in the institutions of learning in which we carry on our professional lives. Now, you may or may not yet be of the conviction that this sensibility--that modernity--is bankrupt. Should you not be of this conviction but also have an opportunity to be in the company of Bill Poteat for any length of time, chances are that in one way or another you will hear from him--you may have already heard from him--something like this: “Haven’t you noticed that modernity is bankrupt?!” For that one message has been constant and central throughout most of Bill Poteat’s intellectual career. What exactly does it mean? How has it been reflected in his teaching and writing? And what is the point of calling the bankruptcy of modernity to our attention? What is he really after?

Others have known Bill Poteat much longer than I have and under quite different conditions. My own acquaintance with him is fairly limited. I shall not venture to generalize over the many facets of his work and person which lie outside of my knowledge, which others know much better than I. However, I do know that in his teaching career at least, he has been and still is an enigma, a puzzlement, even to many who have had opportunity to work closely with him.

I recall talking once with an alumnus of Duke's Graduate Program in Religion, who was then teaching religious studies in the state of Virginia, as I also was at the time. This person had taken a few courses from Bill Poteat. He had found them intriguing and entertaining, captivating in regard to the brilliance and charm of Poteat's wit, but clearly something very different from what he had expected graduate courses in Religious Studies to be. He had also found them to be a source of continuing puzzlement, even frustration, for try as he might he could not make out what it was that Poteat was about, what it was Poteat was trying to convey. Oh, he could relate a number of things that were read and discussed, but clearly there was something else that he felt somehow he had missed--lying there beyond his reach. He intimated that there were others in those classes who were left with similar impressions.

I have reason to believe that this person's impressions of Bill Poteat were not untypical for a good deal of Bill's academic career, if not for the whole of it: they certainly characterized many persons' impressions of him--both students and colleagues--during the years I was a student at Duke (1965-69). And I suspect that they had something to do with the way Bill found himself never quite at home in any of the academic positions he has held: whether in the Department of Philosophy at UNC Chapel Hill, in Duke Divinity School, or Duke's Department of Religion. Indeed, his own dissertation advisees repeatedly queried (at least while I was in residence at Duke): What is it, really, that we are about--beyond the fact that we are trying to follow up some of the things Poteat has introduced us to? What is it, really, that we are doing? And later: What is it that we are teaching to our own students? For many of us, as we have attempted to find a place where we might fit into the conventional university, we have seemed to ourselves--and perhaps to colleagues--neither fish nor fowl; and that, at times, has been damn uncomfortable! I've been ready to say more than once: "A pox on Bill Poteat! I've had enough!"

Bill taught a good many courses in his tenure at Duke, including such titles as "Existentialist Thought" and "The Meaning of Religious Language" (which as I recall when I took it that it never got around to discussing religious language at all), but most of his courses amounted to seminars in which one or more texts, drawn from a select number of authors (which I will identify in what follows), would be the point of departure for intense and wide-ranging philosophical discussion. These discussions would frequently be of a Socratic sort, in which Poteat, through skillful questioning and posing a number of thought-provoking situations for analysis, would draw forth understandings from his students. Rarely would he offer his own views directly, at least not at any length. What his particular views were was never really clear. A good deal of the time his views seemed to be deliberately withheld--not unlike Socrates. These courses were all in the subject area of what for a while was called "Christianity and Culture" and later "Religion and Comparative Studies"--whatever that means. Students taking them were never exposed to a subject area or body of literature which they were required to master in a conventional sense. Nor were they initiated into the practice of an academic discipline as such disciplines are conventionally understood and practiced. Clearly, something else was intended, and something else was going on. Exactly what that was, as I have already intimated, was not and may not now be easily grasped. (It was never, to my knowledge, stated on a syllabus!)

I myself was struck--and, I must admit, refreshed--by the fact that the quantity of work expected by him of

students in his classes was considerably less than that of his colleagues in other parts of the University (as well as in his own department). His courses allowed--no, they encouraged--a student to reflect upon what was being read and discussed, to assimilate and appropriate it in his (the student's) own way, in a manner that was literally impossible in most other courses.

Bill Poteat has been an enigma, then, for many of us. Indeed, examined more closely, there have been circumstances when his enigmatic character seems to have been deliberately cultivated--whether in his approach to teaching, in his way of relating to colleagues, or in the elliptical, involuted style of his published and unpublished writings. It still seems at times to have been deliberately designed to frustrate any "simple, straightforward taking in" of what he has to convey--being comprehensible only to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, to those who have somehow "caught on" to what he has been about.

Soren Kierkegaard--in his academic dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*--faults the portrayal of Socrates in the writings of Xenophon. He faults it for its failure to capture the spirit of Socrates, and in particular, for Xenophon's failure to notice altogether the irony of Socrates. By "irony" here I mean the respects in which Socrates was and was not serious in what he said, the multiple levels of meaning in Socrates' conversations, the way Socrates' words were designed to catch conventional expectations in conversation off guard in order to carry on another agenda, an agenda hidden to those persons who took themselves and their pretensions over-seriously--aspects not unlike the enigmatic characteristics of Poteat's classroom conversations. Xenophon, who was himself a long time friend of Socrates, apparently was able to pick up little more than what was said on the surface and to interpret what that meant as having been issued only with the most sincere and univocal of intentions. In other words. Xenophon apparently could take in only what could simply and straightforwardly be restated in his own prosaic and moralizing way: a "what," a "content," a "teaching"--to be received and perhaps passed on to others at second-hand. The problem was, however, that with Socrates--as with Kierkegaard--the essential thing was not a "what" in that sense at all, but a "how": how it is with one's inward relationship to the Truth, how it is with one's soul--a matter infinitely more essential than some "what" that is indifferent to how it is conveyed and understood. In Kierkegaard's words:

As Xenophon lacks on the one hand an eye for the situation, so on the other he lacks an ear for repartee. . . . Allow me to illustrate my meaning with an image. There is an engraving that portrays the grave of Napoleon. Two large trees overshadow the grave. There is nothing else to be seen in the picture, and the immediate spectator will see no more. Between these two trees, however, is an empty space, and as the eye traces out its contour, Napoleon himself suddenly appears out of the nothingness, and now it is impossible to make him disappear. The eye that has once seen him now always sees him with an anxious necessity. It is the same with Socrates' replies. As one sees the trees, so one hears his discourse; as the trees are trees, so his words mean exactly what they sound like. There is not a single syllable to give any hint of another interpretation, just as there is not a single brush stroke to suggest Napoleon. Yet it is this empty space, this nothingness, that conceals what is most important. As in nature we find examples so curiously situated that those who stand nearest the speaker cannot hear him, but only those who stand at a fixed point often at a great distance; so also with Socrates' replies when one recalls that in this case to hear is identical with understanding, not to hear with misunderstanding. It is these two basic defects that I must urge against Xenophon, yet the situation and the reply are the complex forming the ganglia and

cerebral systems of [spirit].²

Now *spirit* is precisely that with which Socrates was concerned--something manifest and, accordingly, dealt with in terms of “situations” and “replies.” In other words, what Socrates was about is to be found less in terms of *what* was said in the conversations he had with his fellow Athenians, than in terms of the *placement* and *timing* of what was said and the *non-explicit accompaniments* to what was said--such as intonation, gesture, somatic orientation, silence, and the complex web of tensions existing between what precisely was said and what else was and was not said. In *that* lies *spirit*, and *inwardness*, and *the health of the soul* or lack thereof. Such matters do not lie in declarations or explicit pretensions or public reputations or outward accomplishments--or for that matter in opinions one happens to hold or in “teachings.” Unlike Xenophon, then, only a person who has become sensitized to the ironic incongruities that may obtain quite unforeseen between one’s overt pretensions and one’s latent actual condition disclosed through “situations” and “replies” will be in a position to hear Socrates truly. Only a person who has become inwardly free from being taken up with outward appearances and overt pretensions will be in a position to recognize what Socrates was about. Only such a person will be in a position to recognize what Kierkegaard was about. And only such a person will really be in a position to recognize and understand what Bill Poteat has been about.

So, one may have heard and heard again what Bill Poteat has said; one may have read and read again what Bill Poteat has written; one may even have come to be an expert on his work, write a dissertation on it, hold a professorial chair in Poteat Studies and, nevertheless, despite all this, fail to grasp its significance. For it has to do not with a *what* but with a *how*, not with an explicitly determinable content--a “body of knowledge”--open to indifferent intellectual scrutiny. Rather, it has to do with something that cannot straightforwardly be said and comprehended in modern intellectual terms at all. It has to do with undergoing a shift in sensibility, a radical shift: from attending to *what* (which takes for granted a certain how of intellection) to attending to *the how of intellection itself*, and specifically to *the how of being both an intellectual and oneself, a whole person* in the world.

Now beware! As I threaten to betray what may appear to be the inside story, I run the risk of turning this *how*--with which Poteat’s work is supposed to have been concerned and which allegedly cannot be made into a *what*--into a *what*. Thereby I would be giving you a perfect excuse for intellectualizing away the point of it all, for parrying its challenge to each of us seriously to reexamine our own modes of intellection, to discover what ironic contradictions lurk beneath the surface of our intellectual endeavors as they are manifest in terms of our “situations” and our “replies.”

The modern intellectual sensibility which we take for granted in our ordinary intellectual approach to what we hear and read--and to what you are reading from me at this moment--works in us in such a way as to distance and neutralize what is conveyed to us as “content-to-be-subdued-to-our-own-intellectual-ordering-and-scrutiny;” as being abstracted from any “situation” and demanding from us no “reply;” as something which we will be free to take into account or no, to dispose with as we will, indifferently; hence, as standing in no particular relation to us as persons and having no *normative* claim upon us as persons--except as we arbitrarily deign to grant it that claim. The ordinary mode of intellection which we tend to take for granted, I say, renders us *free in our own thinking* (though not latently in reality) *from personal liability* toward that which we conceive. As well, it renders us free from purposive orientation in respect to what we conceive: it deprives us of a basis on which we might find our feet with respect to it. As modern intellectuals we traffic in explicit pretensions that can have only the most equivocal personal backing, if they can have it at all; we write and exchange checks presuming we can ignore whether there is any money in the bank to redeem them. This mode of intellection which makes us “masters and possessors” (Descartes) of that which we conceive,

by the identical process makes us worldless, spectating intellects in relation to it, causing us to lose track of where we stand as persons in respect to it and to what it demands from us in our own persons. In the measure we accede thereby to intellectual power over the objects of our conception, true wisdom escapes from our grasp. We hardly even know what ‘wisdom’ means any more. And that is our tragedy. One might say, if it did not have such misleading connotations to say so, it is our *spiritual* predicament.

It is also what it has been that Bill Poteat has been trying to call to our attention throughout his career. As he himself stated quite unequivocally near the beginning of his intellectual career in his dissertation, *Pascal’s Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility*³: modernity, the modern critical sensibility to which we are all heirs, in the mastery of which we take great pride and in terms of which we have wrought our scholarly achievements, is bankrupt, *spiritually* bankrupt.

A few years ago I discovered a wonderful book, which I would commend to you: *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education*, by Parker Palmer. In it Palmer sheds a good deal of light upon the matters of which I have just been speaking from the perspective of a study of monastic disciplines of spiritual formation.

A discipline of spiritual formation, he explains, is a daily practice by which a religious community deepens and renews its rapport with what it understands of ultimate reality which life’s misleading appearances so easily obscure and cloud over. At the same time, it is a means by which the community recalls itself to the inner form of the way life is meant to be lived, in opposition to the dissipating and deforming tensions of which mundane life is full. It is, in short, a method whereby a specific spiritual sensibility is cultivated and renewed. From the Christian monastic tradition Palmer identifies three such spiritual disciplines which pertains directly to the experience of education: (1) the study of sacred texts, (2) the practice of prayer and contemplation, and (3) the gathered life of the community itself.

First, *the study of sacred texts* is that discipline whereby a member of the community maintains contact with paradigm expressions of the spiritual tradition in which he is being formed. In Palmer’s words, “These texts allow me to return to times of deeper spiritual insight than my own, to recollect truths that my culture obscures, to have companions on the spiritual journey who, though long dead, may be more alive spiritually than many who are with me now. In such study my heart and mind are reformed by the steady press of tradition against the distortions of my day.”⁴

Second, *the practice of prayer and contemplation* is that discipline whereby a member of the community “seeks immediate personal experience of that to which tradition can only testify.”⁵ Its purpose is “to see through and beyond the appearances of things, to penetrate the surface and touch that which lies beneath.”⁶ It is a matter of developing in oneself eyes to see, ears to hear, and an appropriate responsiveness to the realities to which the tradition attests. Above all, it is the means whereby one clears the way inwardly for one’s spirit to make contact with that which impassions life toward its fulfillment.

Third, *the gathered life of the community* is that discipline whereby a member of the community is checked against the personal distortions which can arise in the solitude of study and prayer. It helps him interpret the meaning of the sacred texts and it gives him guidance in his experience of prayer. It is also the means whereby the inner form of his life, which the tradition intends to nurture within him, is encouraged, tested, and refined.

It would be interesting to explore the remnants of these three disciplines in their distant offspring, our contemporary institutions of education, and the way in which, despite protestations to the contrary, these secular institutions covertly carry on still a kind of spiritual formation. (Perhaps “spiritual deformation” would be a better word for it.) Palmer goes on to do just that in his book, bringing out quite clearly how the modern intellectual sensibility is itself formed and renewed in our day, from one discipline to the next.

However, my concern here is to pose another question: Is it not plausible to consider that what Bill Poteat has been about--particularly in his teaching--may be a matter of spiritual formation and renewal in precisely the sense that Palmer describes?

Consider this statement taken from the preface to Poteat’s *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*:

What follows is not a piece of scholarship such as conceivably could emerge from a protracted and solitary apprenticeship to books, although its indebtedness to the things I have read during some thirty years in the academy is substantial and palpable. It issues rather from a sustained critical colloquy with three generations of graduate students set among a half-dozen or so “canonical” volumes in the context of our mutual search for the imagination’s way out of what Walker Percy has called the “old modern age.”

I, and my students in the measure to which they have truly joined the colloquy, have from the outset aspired to be radically critical of the Critical tradition of modernity, which is to say, we have undertaken to become postcritical.

Like any parasite, this essentially polemical convivium has batted on its host, hoping, not to weaken and eventually bring down, but, rather, modestly to change the universities in which it was formed and by whose sufferance it has lived. At least those of us who have sustained this colloquy have hoped to be and have changed.⁷

Let us take a look to see to what extent the three disciplines of spiritual formation identified earlier are in evidence in the context of Poteat’s teaching: the study of sacred texts, the practice of prayer and contemplation, and the gathered life of the community itself.

First, the study of the sacred texts: the quotation from Poteat just cited referred to “a half-dozen or so ‘canonical’ volumes” to the study of which three generations of graduate students were introduced. These volumes include Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, and Søren Kierkegaard’s works, particularly Kierkegaard’s essay, “The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or the Musical Erotic.” Other works were included from time to time, but these remain pretty much the canonical point of departure for most all that went on of substance in Poteat’s classes.

Why these authors? Why these particular books? Precisely because in these books their authors undertook a radical, comprehensive critique of the “prepossessions of the European Enlightenment concerning the nature of human knowing and doing”⁸ and also a critique of the way the modern critical tradition has presumed criticisms should

be conducted. Poteat describes them as texts

in which modern culture . . . is under the maximum radical pressure from the author and which, therefore, most vividly discloses--sometimes wittingly but more often unwittingly--the repertoire of concepts in which both we and the author are immured. Usually these are *profoundly confused* books, for no author is so likely edifyingly to exhibit his or her embrangement in those very destructive conceptual dualisms which define modernity as when he or she undertakes to bring them explicitly under attack. Kierkegaard is an instructive case. In bondage to Hegelianism, he tried--on the whole unwittingly and unsuccessfully--to fight his way clear of that thinker who presumed to bond together the Greek metaphors of stasis and the Hebrew metaphors of dynamism in a system which would transcend them both. To observe Kierkegaard struggling to disentangle Christianity from Hegelianism is at once to realize the high conceptual stakes at issue and the odds arrayed against him and us.⁹

Moreover, in these books their respective authors have gropingly sought to stake out what an alternative, post-critical mode of inquiry and intellection might involve. Though no one of them ever quite entirely succeeds, as Poteat mentioned, their failures are instructive. In short, these “canonical” volumes are paradigms of what is involved in attempting the negotiation of a transition from, or “out of,” a critical sensibility to a post-critical intellectual sensibility. They model, to use Polanyi’s phrase, what it means to struggle toward achieving a balanced mind amidst a civilization “pervaded by the dissonance of an extreme critical lucidity and an intense moral conscience.”¹⁰ Taking them together--forcing their authors, as it were, to undertake a sustained colloquy with one another, each one illuminating, constructively criticizing, and complementing the others--they constitute a convivial order of spirit, to whose saneness of sensibility three generations of Poteat students have apprenticed themselves.

Second, the practice of prayer and contemplation: Now, certainly, in no ordinary or usual sense have Bill Poteat’s students been remarkable for their piety! Or Bill Poteat himself, for that matter! However, if we think of this particular spiritual discipline apart from the usual connotations we attach to prayer and contemplation, if we think of it rather as the practice of a specially heightened mode of perception and reflection for getting in touch with that which most deeply concerns one as a thinking, reflecting person, we may indeed find something. Recall what I said earlier about “situation” and “reply” and how many persons, like Xenophon, are blind and deaf to this dimension of human thought and expression--namely, the *placement* and *timing* of what is said and the *non-explicit accompaniments* to what is said, such as intonation, gesture, somatic orientation, silence, and the complex web of tensions existing between what precisely is said (the precise words chosen and in what order) and what else is and is not said: clues wherein spirit, inwardness, and the health of the soul or lack thereof are to be detected. Becoming sensitive to these sorts of things has been as much a part of a Poteat seminar as anything else--though it mainly is focused on developing a facility for ferreting out presuppositions and prepossessions, radical or root conceptual commitments, implicit in a certain way of putting things or way of going about inquiring into something. Reflecting on his early teaching experience wherein he was gradually evolving his teaching style, Bill once wrote:

My apprenticeship as a teacher was for ten years in a department of philosophy. During this time, my evolving personal style of pedagogy came to be dialectical. In introductory courses, I was increasingly struck in the midst of philosophical give and take by the incongruity between, on the one hand, the most radical conceptual commitments of my students, and, on the other, their express

beliefs. I found, for example, that while tacitly by an acritically received cultural inheritance, they were Marxians, Freudians, Darwinians, neo-behaviorists, or what have you, their explicit professions were different from and incompatible with these views, even though this was almost never recognized by them. Indeed, on the contrary, when these radical commitments were expressly presented to them as their own, most students initially rejected most of them out of hand--until they were rendered mute by the dialectically disclosed fact that they **were**.¹¹

Søren Kierkegaard had a name for the kind of heightened perception and reflection cultivated in these dialectical discussions with Poteat: he called it the practice of “double-reflection.”¹² Whereas first order or direct reflection seeks to understand the concrete abstractly (for all reflection in the usual sense involves conceptual representation and all conceptual representation involves abstraction to some degree), the “doubling” of reflection in double-reflection is concerned to ‘understand’ the activity of abstraction in reflection concretely. It is reflection’s concern to keep track of its situation as an activity or event of reflecting in the ambient, interhuman world vis-a-vis that about which it is reflecting and to keep it oriented with respect to what is ultimately at stake. The goal of double-reflection--beyond bringing to light the *de facto* relationships that may obtain between the explicit content of a person’s thought and his latent situation in existence--is two-fold. First, double-reflection seeks to disabuse our natural powers of reflective conception of the presumptiveness inherent in them. For example, it seeks to disabuse us of the tendency to lose sight of the concrete context within which our reflection is engendered. It seeks to disabuse us of the tendency to forget the perspectival, partial nature of our conceptual grasp of things. And it seeks to disabuse us of the tendency to confuse the objectifications which are the product of reflection with the matters they purport to represent. In short, it seeks to keep us looking beyond our representations to the truth in those respects in which the truth exceeds our grasp. Second, double-reflection seeks to bring the latent **how** of our situation in existence into agreement with the truth we come to know--i.e., the way we go about inquiring into something, conceiving it, responding to it, and conveying it to others. In sum, double-reflection aims to overcome the tendencies to ironic absent-mindedness that characterize modern critical patterns of intellection in order to realize an integrity of person in faithful rapport with truth.

(This goal, as you might well imagine, is more easily acknowledged than achieved. Awareness of what is involved in a self-conscious struggle toward mastery of it goes a long way toward explaining the elliptical and involuted style of writing and speaking that has so often characterized both Bill Poteat as well as his students. It also makes one more appreciative of the grace-full-ness of integral utterance when it occurs.)

Third, the gathered life of the community itself: though a genuine community among Bill Poteat’s students outside the classroom has waxed and waned over the years, it is clear that mutual encouragement, testing, and refinement of their developing post-critical sensibility has been an essential aspect of the colloquy that many of us have sustained with Bill and each other in the classroom and out. More for some, clearly, than for others. Regardless, many of us have not hesitated to speak of that colloquy as a genuine convivial order and a paradigm of that in which a post-critical ethos might consist, where each is encouraged fully to be himself or herself in following up his or her intimations of some aspect of what jointly we are concerned to bring to light.

All three of the complementary disciplines of spiritual formation identified by Palmer--the study of the sacred texts, the practice of prayer and contemplation, and the gathered life of the community itself--are in evidence in Poteat’s teaching. And, when considered in connection with the ongoing colloquy to which I have referred, his published

writings give evidence of these disciplines as well. Taken together they provide an explanation for much of the “enigma” that has been Bill Poteat’s academic career--which I earlier characterized as being concerned with teaching neither mastery of some specified body of knowledge nor mastery of some conventional academic discipline. It seems to have been concerned, rather, with the “spiritual formation” of young intellectuals “searching for the imagination’s way out of . . . the ‘Old Modern Age.’” It has given them a place and a space in the university where they can be concerned with this dimension of intellectual life. As Parker Palmer puts it, it has created “a space where obedience to truth can be practiced.”¹³

Considered in this respect, then, it may be easier to see an analogy between a Poteat seminar and, say, a Rinzai Zen master conducting a question and answer session with a group of Zen novices--concerned not to convey content but to attend the emergence of a spiritually whole sensibility in each--than it would be to see an analogy between a Poteat seminar and any other at Duke University. The analogy is far from exact but is appropriate nonetheless.

Just as an authentic Zen master never regards himself as having “arrived” but is always open to learn more, to become himself ever more fully at one with his Original Nature, so also Bill Poteat late in his career came to discover for himself, more profoundly than he had earlier realized, what breaking free from the “Old Modern Age” could entail. I have in mind here the personal experience recounted in the introduction to *Polanyian Meditations*, cited earlier. It bespeaks well certain aspects of the transition to a post-critical perspective.

In November of 1968, in Athens, Greece, more than sixteen years into my apprenticeship to the thought of Michael Polanyi, I wrote an essay of barely five hundred words which I called “The Voice of Orpheus.” It quite took my be surprise: its demand to be written, what it said, the claim upon me of what it said.

The immediate occasion for its composition was an ecstatic afternoon spent with new wine and my new friend, the sculptor, Evangelos Moustakas, amidst the wild thyme, in Greece’s November light, on the amiable gradients of Pentelis mountain. . . .

During twenty years of teaching and study before my Greek adventure I had contended against the desiccation of spirit wrought in me by [the] Enlightenment. The diagnosis of the nature and extent of the malaise had been focused in my doctoral dissertation, *Pascal’s Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility*. In this I entered the seventeenth century cockpit from which modernity had emerged and opposed two of its great and characteristic thinkers: Pascal and Descartes. . . . Here was shaped for me the problem which has occupied me now for nearly thirty years: the nature of rationality and logic in an intellectual climate in which Descartes has prevailed and left us culturally insane.

I was thus well begun by this toward becoming a post-critical *thinker*. The discovery, in 1952, I think, of early “philosophical” writings of Michael Polanyi . . . accredited and greatly enriched the context within which I began initially to obey my own intimations. . . .

Regular graduate seminars for 16 years on *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* made me something of an adept in Polanyi’s criticism of criticism--or so I thought. I had, in fact, gone about as far as one can in bringing the intellectual resources of the Enlightenment to bear critically upon the Enlightenment. My complacency was a characteristic product of the

Enlightenment. I “understood” the thing to be done in primarily intellectual terms; I supposed it could be significantly done without ever leaving the modern Western world, defined as Renaissance, Reform and Enlightenment.

It was my meeting with Greece and Moustakas, for neither of whom Renaissance, Reform and Enlightenment were events native to their stories, that the other of myself was profoundly and mindbodily challenged and called forth “by emotions and ideas . . . even the most abstract notions presented in familiar form.”

It was an Orphic dismemberment. The intellectual categories upon which I had relied no longer fit. My whole being--my mindbodily being--was riven.

Moustakas, in his work and person, bore witness before me to a wholeness of being at once alien and familiar: alien as an other to my intellect; familiar as an exigent need of my total being. There we were together on Pentelis mountain and the Voice of Orpheos demanded to be heard. And so--“a small essay for my friend, Vangelis, who, like Orpheos, makes rocks move and dumb bronze to sing”--I wrote: “The myth of Orpheos . . . is a representation more profound than any which reflection could give of the presence of order and of form in the cosmos; of the genesis of song and dance; and finally of human speech and intelligence. . . . Far then from being a surprise, it is on the contrary most congenial to an imagination like mine, enfolded as it is in a rhythmically ordered body, that dumb rocks and trees should be represented as resounding to the Orphic song, even as my own dumb body itself so resounds.”¹⁴

What is going on here in Poteat’s recovery of a dimension of himself--indeed a somatic dimension of his own intelligence--that had been eclipsed to his modern mind illustrates well the nature of the “spiritual re-formation” involved in a transition from a critical to a post-critical intellectual perspective. How is that? Let us back up for a moment.

To have acquired a modern critical mind is to have been habituated, on the one hand, to **distrust** one’s first and natural inclination to indwell the world believingly and, on the other hand, to **entrust** oneself to the attitude of critical suspicion as the cardinal intellectual virtue. This is because modernity is premised on the assumption that the root of all error is man’s inherent proclivity to project into reality what is not there but only in himself, in his subjective bias. Our modern intellectual conscience insists that you will get at the **truth** of the matters that concern you only by divesting yourself of subjectivity, by stepping outside of your merely personal, mindbodily orientation toward them. In consequence, on reflection at least, we moderns have difficulty believing in our own (inevitably mindbodily grounded) beliefs and trusting without defensiveness in any inwardly perceived (inevitably mindbodily grounded) summons to venture beyond the safety of critically established truths.

On the contrary, a post-critical perspective is one that, having passed through the baptism of fire constituted by the modern criticism of subjectivity, nevertheless regains confidence in one’s own personal, mindbodily place and orientation in the world--regains confidence in it not as truth itself, but as one’s own best (one’s only!) avenue, or clue, or stage on the way to the discovery of **truth in common**. It is there, in the very particular incarnate rootage of our mindbodily being in the world, with its very particular past, however seemingly narrow, deprived, and parochial it may appear to a deracinate critical perspective; it is there, in being fully oneself, that the wellsprings of a sensibility and passion for integrity of person in devotion to truth are to be found. In T.S. Elliot’s phrases,

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁵

As a concluding rumination, I have chosen to share with you some passages from Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows* which capture exquisitely what it was like for some of Poteat's students to undergo the transition from a critical to a post-critical perspective in the company of Bill Poteat--at least what it was like for me.

The incident in question occurs when Mole and Rat

. . . were returning across country after a long day's outing with Otter. . . . Plodding at random across the plough . . . , they found a beaten track that made walking a lighter business, and responded, moreover, to that small inquiring something which all animals carry inside them, saying unmistakably, 'Yes, quite right; *this* leads home!'

Leads, that is, to Rat's home--River Bank--where Mole had some time before taken up living in Rat's congenial company, having left behind him the dark cramped life he had once lived underground, to enjoy the wonderful open life of sky and river, forest and field.

They plodded along steadily and silently, each of them thinking his own thoughts, when a . . . mysterious fairy [call] . . . from out the void . . . suddenly reached Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through with its very familiar appeal, even while as yet he could not clearly remember what it was. He stopped dead in his tracks, his nose searching hither and thither in its efforts to recapture the fine filament, the telegraphic current, that had so strongly moved him. A moment, and he had caught it again; and with it this time came recollection in fullest flood.

Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way! Why, it must be quite close by him at that moment, his old home that he had hurriedly forsaken and never sought again, that day when he first found the river! And now it was sending out its scouts and its messengers to capture him and bring him in. Since his escape on that bright morning he had hardly given it a thought, so absorbed had he been in his new life, in all its pleasures, its surprises, its fresh and captivating experiences. Now, with a rush of old memories, how clearly it stood up before him, in the darkness! Shabby indeed, and small and poorly furnished, and yet his, the home he had made for himself, the home he had been so happy to get back to after his day's work. And the home had been happy with him, too, evidently, and was missing him, and wanted him back, and was telling him so, through his nose, sorrowfully, reproachfully, but with no bitterness or anger; only with plaintive reminder that it was there, and wanted him.

The call was clear, the summons was plain. He must obey it instantly, and go. 'Ratty!' he called, full of joyful excitement, 'hold on! Come back! I want you, quick!'

At first Rat didn't hear clearly what it was that Mole was trying to say and pushed on, causing Mole to experience for a few moments the most excruciating inner rendering--being forced to choose between loyalty to home or loyalty to his new friend. With a wrench that tore his very heartstrings, he set his face down the road and followed submissively but completely dispirited in Rat's footsteps. Shortly thereafter, however, as they paused to rest, Mole broke down

completely in cascades of tears. But Rat, astonished and dismayed at the violence of Mole's grief, sensitively and slowly drew out what the source of it was. Then, without a second thought for the promise of a warm fire and supper at River Bank, and to Mole's astonishment and protestations, he took Mole in arm and turned back upon the path to locate Mole's home. Once they returned to the place where Mole had been 'held up,' they soon located the entrance.

Mole's face beamed at the sight of all [those] objects so dear to him, and he hurried Rat through the door, lit a lamp in the hall, and took one glance around his old home. He saw the dust lying thick on everything, saw the cheerless, deserted look of the long-neglected house, and its narrow, meagre dimensions, its worn and shabby contents--and collapsed again on a hall-chair, his nose in his paws. 'O, Ratty!' he cried dismally, 'why ever did I do it? Why did I bring you to this poor, cold little place, on a night like this, when you might have been at River Bank by this time, toasting your toes before a blazing fire, with all your own nice things about you!'

The Rat paid no heed to his doleful self-reproaches. He was running here and there, opening doors, inspecting rooms and cupboards, and lighting lamps and candles and sticking them up everywhere. 'What a capital little house this is!' he called out cheerily. 'So compact! So well planned! Everything here and everything in its place! We'll make a jolly night of it. The first thing we want is a good fire; I'll see to that--I always know where to find things. So this is the parlour? Splendid! Your own idea, those little sleeping-bunks in the wall? Capital! Now, I'll fetch the wood and the coals, and you get a duster, Mole--you'll find one in the drawer of the kitchen table--and try and smarten things up a bit. Bustle about, old chap!'

Encouraged by his inspiriting companion, the Mole roused himself and dusted and polished with energy and heartiness, while the Rat, running to and fro with armfuls of fuel, soon had a cheerful blaze roaring up the chimney. He hailed the Mole to come and warm himself; but Mole promptly had another fit of the blues, dropping down on a couch in dark despair and burying his face in his duster.

'Rat,' he moaned, 'how about your supper, you poor, cold, hungry, weary animal? I've nothing to give you--nothing--not a crumb!'

'What a fellow you are for giving in!' said the Rat reproachfully, 'Why, only just now I saw a sardine-opener on the kitchen dresser, quite distinctly; and everybody knows that means there are sardines about somewhere in the neighbourhood. Rouse yourself! Pull yourself together, and come with me and forage.'

They went and foraged accordingly, hunting through every cupboard and turning out every drawer. The result was not so very depressing after all, though of course it might have been better; a tin of sardines--a box of captain's biscuits, nearly full--and a German sausage encased in silver paper.

'There's a banquet for you!' observed the Rat, as he arranged the table. 'I know some animals who would give their ears to be sitting down to supper with us tonight!'

'No bread!' groaned the Mole dolerously; 'no butter, no--'

'No *pâté de foie gras*, no champagne!' continued the Rat, grinning. 'And that reminds me--what's that little door at the end of the passage? Your cellar, of course! Every luxury in this house! Just you wait a minute.'

He made for the cellar door, and presently reappeared, somewhat dusty, with a bottle of beer in each paw and another under each arm. 'Self-indulgent beggar you seem to be, Mole,' he observed. 'Deny yourself nothing. This is really the jolliest little place I ever was in. Now, wherever did you pick up these prints? Make the place look so home-like, they do. No wonder you're so fond of it, Mole. Tell us all about it, and how you came to make it what it is.'

The evening went so well and perfectly, Mole could not have imagined a better homecoming. Ratty even enabled Mole to take genuine pride in offering the best of hospitality to a troupe of field mice that happened by, singing Christmas carols.

When the door had closed on the last of them and the chink of the lanterns had died away, Mole

and Rat kicked the fire up, drew their chairs in, brewed themselves a last nightcap of mulled ale, and discussed the events of the long day. At last the Rat, with a tremendous yawn, said, 'Mole, old chap, I'm ready to drop. Sleepy is simply not the word. That your bunk over on that side? Very well, then, I'll take this. What a ripping little house this is! Everything so handy!'

He clambered into his bunk and rolled himself well up in the blankets, and slumber gathered him forthwith, as a swath of barley is folded into the arms of the reaping-machine.

The weary Mole also was glad to turn in without delay, and soon had his head on his pillow, in great joy and contentment. But ere he closed his eyes he let them wander round his own room, mellow in the glow of the firelight that played or rested on familiar and friendly things which had long been unconsciously a part of him, and now smilingly received him back, without rancour. He was now in just the frame of mind that the tactful Rat had quietly worked to bring about in him. He saw clearly how plain and simple--how narrow, even--it all was; but clearly, too, how much it all meant to him, and the special value of some such anchorage in one's existence. He did not at all want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on sun and air and all they offered him and creep home and stay there; the upper world was all too strong, it called still, even down there, and he knew he must return to the larger stage. But it was good to think he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome.¹⁶

And that's how it was!

Endnotes

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the North Carolina Religious Studies Association on October 10, 1984, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The meeting was entirely dedicated to an exploration of the work of William H. Poteat.

²Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, translated by Lee M. Capel (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 56.

³William H. Poteat, *Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 1951).

⁴Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 17ff.

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

⁶Ibid., p. 19.

⁷William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1985), p. ix.

⁸Ibid., p. 2.

⁹William H. Poteat, "Religion and Culture As I See It: Being A Small Down-Payment On Collegiality," (unpublished essay, circa 1973), p. 2.

¹⁰Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966). p. 4.

¹¹Poteat, "Religion and Culture. . .," p. 1.

¹²Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 67ff et passim.

¹³Palmer, p. 69ff.

¹⁴Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, pp. 1, 6-8.

¹⁵T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), p. 59.

¹⁶Kenneth Graham, *The Wind in the Willows* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), chapter 5: "Dulce Domum," pp. 75, 79-96.

William Poteat's Anthropology: "Mindbody in the World"

Walter B. Mead

ABSTRACT: Key words: mindbody, pretension, retrotension, epistemological radix, prereflection, ontological hierarchy, coherence, meaning.

Using the metaphor of a circle with its center, periphery, and radius, this essay explores William Poteat's understanding of the self, or "mindbody," in its dynamic and creative relation to the larger world, or cosmos, identifying the mindbody's prereflective radix with the "center," its boundary or point of interface with the larger world with the "periphery," and its dialectical evolution and articulation of a sense of coherence and meaning in terms of a pretensive and retrotensive "radius."

I: The Indeterminate Anthropological Center

If you place mystery at the center of existence, the rest will fall into place. However, if you place reason at the center, all will be chaotic (paraphrase of G.K. Chesterton by an unknown).

In his "Prologue" to *Polanyian Meditations* (1985), William Poteat notes that it was his discovery in 1952 of some of Michael Polanyi's early philosophical writings that "accredited and greatly enriched the context within which initially to obey my own intimations" (6). This same year marked the beginning for Professor Poteat of now more than four decades, innumerable lectures, more than thirty articles or chapters, and three books in obedience to those intimations.¹ Polanyi's influence throughout is obvious, but it served primarily as a catalyst. Poteat's intimations were his own. From the beginning Professor Poteat articulates a conceptual framework and addresses issues that extend his post-critical reflections well beyond the Polanyian corpus. Still, even his most original insights, he himself acknowledges, consistently retrotend (to use one of Poteat's seminal concepts) "deeply interiorized Polanyian motifs" (*PM*, 8).

Although the general thrust of Poteat's works, like Polanyi's philosophical writings, is epistemological, one of his major contributions is his articulation of an anthropology consistent with his post-critical epistemology. Having started with, and explored through his own conceptual categories, the Polanyian realization that all knowing is tacitly grounded, that is, radically tacit, he then asks what is the nature of this tacit radix? His underlying assumption, like Polanyi's, is that "the structure of our way of *knowing* in the world reduplicates our way of *being* in the world--at least in the sense that an integral analysis of neither can be abstracted from time" (*PM*, 25). Therefore, "a theory of knowing must be inextricably implicated with a theory of being." (*PP*, 80). It is significant that Stines and Nickell chose to entitle their edited collection representing the vast range of Poteat's scholarship *The Primacy of Persons* . . . Michael Polanyi insists, in *Personal Knowledge*, that "by contrast to a field of forces operating in an inanimate system, a field of *biological* striving stands defined by the fact that we attribute its operations to *an active center*" (404, emphasis added). And all the more do these tensile forces become consolidated and cocentered as they become conscious, deliberative, deliberate, and committal--that is, as Polanyi puts it in *The Tacit Dimension*, "the center of the individual [organism]."

.. rises to the level of personhood in man” (50).

It is upon this insight that Polanyi proceeds to develop his dynamic understanding of developmental hierarchy--not only phylogenetic (evolutionary) but ontogenetic, and not only *developmental* hierarchy but also a functional and ontological hierarchy, all of these hierarchies contained within the Polanyian concept of emergence. Poteat’s insights are clearly beneficiary to these and other related rich Polanyian conceptual resources--for example, the concepts of boundary conditions and marginal control, the tacit and the explicit, interiorizing and indwelling, the subsidiary and the focal, attending from and attending to, the proximal and the distal, intimation, and the fiducial aspect of knowing. Poteat does not, indeed, literally employ all of these same terms, but he incorporates them to various degrees in his own, often richer, terminology and vision. For example, Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal, from-to dynamic of knowing becomes Poteat’s pretensive-retrotensive dynamic, grounded in memory but impelled and directed by imagination. Even though he extends his reflections considerably beyond areas of concern represented by Polanyi, at only one point in all of his writings (which I shall comment on in Part II) does his thinking contradict what appears to be implicate in Polanyi’s own thinking; and even there Poteat suggests that his thesis is not inconsistent with Polanyi’s obvious intentions. This is not to overlook some significant differences in emphasis between the two thinkers.

After interiorizing the concepts of both Polanyi and Poteat, it is easy to forget precisely where the former has left off and the latter takes off, so great is the continuity between them. However, in going back to the Polanyian works, it becomes clear that, however richly suggestive Polanyi’s treatment is of the anthropological question, he does not go very far with it. Poteat takes it much farther. Adding his own interpretive categories to Polanyi’s--I am referring especially to Poteat’s focus upon both temporality and corporeality as he conceptualizes both knowing and being--he provides his own valuable insights. It is probably, in large part, Poteat’s sophistication in linguistics, especially etymology, that gives him particular sensitivity to the temporal dimension of being and meaning and to the gradual loss of appreciation for this dimension with the ascendance of alphabetic literacy. (Assured that the ambiguous association of this properized noun with the Latin *lexis*, as well as *lex*, could not escape Poteat’s attention, one is tempted to ask, to whom else would it occur to name his English Mastiff, not “Rex,” but “Lex”!) He does to philosophical anthropology what Einstein did to physics. Taking “time”--actually, mindbodily tonicity--as his radical “constant,” he interprets all else, even space (“It takes ‘time’ to see” [*PM*, 61]), in terms of it. His refinement specifically of the corporeal dimension of self, similarly by temporalizing it (i.e., by defining it in terms of tonicity), we shall treat shortly.

G.K. Chesterton observed that “one may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star.”² Poteat appears to agree with Chesterton when he (Poteat) acknowledges the seeming incongruity of his attempt “to grasp in reflection that which is itself the radix and provenance of reflexion” (*RG*, ms). “The gestalt . . . laid down in the most primitive intentionalities of my mindbody [is] far beyond the reach of reflection” (*RG*, ms). In a more linguistic analysis of the elusiveness of the self, Poteat observes that “‘I’ . . . for me . . . is elusive . . . for when I use ‘I’ in order to say something about myself at one logical level, there is the fact of my activity of saying this about myself at another logical level yet to be reported” (*PP*, 174-75). And: “‘Mindbody’ is not an ordinary concept . . . since it always makes reference to the antecedent of *all* concepts, that which devises and interprets the use and application of all concepts” (*RG*, ms). As a thinking, reflecting being attempting to articulate his insights to other thinking, reflecting beings, Poteat must rely on concepts. Yet, the ground to which he would point us is *preconceptual*. Therefore, “the user of language can . . . never be objectified in language He is only found ‘behind’ the language *just now being used*” (*PP*, 73). Therefore, actually, this mindbodily “‘ground’ . . . is *not* a ground, but rather the systematically elusive

background that is our primordial dwelling in time and space”(RG, ms). However, changing his perspectival imagery further, from “background,” to “ground,” and then “foreground,” Poteat suggests that “as the ground of the meaning and the intentionality of my asseverations, my mindbody is in the foreground, too close at hand readily to be perceived” (RG, ms). Therefore, it is, in a very real sense, *not* more distant than any star. Indeed, he suggests paradoxically, with a twist on the Augustinian phrase, that our mindbodies are “closer to us than we are to ourselves” (RG, ms). Finally: “So far as reflection from out of our mindbodies seeks itself as an object among objects, it will fail to find itself” (RG, ms).

Fully aware of the obstacles and dangers in the path of self-reflexion, Poteat sets for himself this highly introspective task--one that justifies, indeed recommends, his “daybook” style of reflection. The objectifying and abstracting culture and traditions of alphabetic and linear literacy that constantly intrude upon such incursive reflexion, require the temporal-spatial orientation, concreteness, and repeated beginnings of this style. And, despite the inherently static, atemporal, and abstracting proclivities of his medium, the printed word, ironically, it at least offers, better than oral/aural discourse, even if it does not incorporate it as well, the *time* the reader requires if the interiorization and assimilation (indwelling) needed for real reflexion are to occur.

Despite the inherent elusiveness of our task, Poteat advises us that, if we indwell our mindbodies, we can “know” them as “at [our] backs” just as “dualism is healed by being shown to be derivative of the bedrock pretensions and retentions of our convivial mindbodily being” (RG, ms). Sometimes, by indwelling that which we can directly experience--such as our heartbeats, our remembering, and our imagining--we get a sense of the primitive, prereflective intentionalities that constitute our mindbodies. It is the *reconciling* of the two “parts” of the dualisms rather than the elimination of either “part” that brings us closer to truth, to reality, and to ourselves. The healing, or reconciling, of the dualisms, like the “knowing” of our primal selves, or mindbodies, is simple, we are told, because it merely requires us to do what we always--and quite naturally--do: indwell. But to *say* what we thereby come to “know” is quite a different and more difficult matter. We must struggle, through a process that Poteat alludes to as “reflexive phenomenology” (PD, 82), to bring the unreflected and tacit to the level of focal and explicit reflection. But much of the unreflected is unreflectable, unexplicitable. And even that which profitably lends itself to differentiated reflection risks being torn from its meaning--and life-giving prereflective and undifferentiated roots. Therefore, Poteat warns that while “the radical truth about our being in the world is . . . simple . . . it is not simply said; since it can be said at all only by means of a feat of estrangement from that [truthful] simplicity” (PM, 22).

Professor Poteat tries to assure us that our world-creations that are reflections, therefore relative abstractions, are no less real than the prereflective concretions from which they derive--only *derivative* realities. Even the static, “dead slice,” second-order representations of space and time that Poteat spends so much time warning that we not take as exhaustive of our understanding of temporality--or, better, tonicity--appear to have their proper place in our “world creating.” Although “derivative” and “not as radical as that from which they derive . . . the primordial [mindbodily place and time] whence all times and places are pretended, that every time and place retentends,” these reflected, abstracted times and places are no less real (PD, 68). The crucial condition that gives these derived concepts reality, or authenticity, is our *awareness* of their derivative, therefore “second-order,” nature. Within this perspective they can serve us well in our “quotidian doings and sayings.”

Similarly, in his effort to avoid the shoals of philosophical idealism, Poteat stresses the primal homogeneity of an undifferentiated “mindbody.” Still, the “mind” of the *differentiated*, abstracted self, while derivative--both

etiologically (that is, in terms of ontogenetic and phylogenetic evolution) and ontologically (that is, in terms of its abstraction and differentiation from a more concrete and undifferentiated mindbody)--is also claimed to be fully real. *Can* one, without contradiction, simultaneously assign something an ontologically derivative status and still claim for it equal, therefore implicitly commensurable, reality with that from which it is derived? Further, can one maintain ontological hierarchy--as clearly Poteat intends to do--while assuaging dualisms by assigning *full reality* to both terms of the dualism, as well as to the archaic, undifferentiated mindbody? Does this conflict with Polanyi's understanding of either "reality" (an entity's "independence and power for manifesting itself in yet unthought of ways in the future") or ontological hierarchy, according to which "minds and problems possess a deeper reality than cobblestones"? (*TD*, 32).

Perhaps it is a sign of Professor Poteat's attempt to struggle with this problem that we can detect some significant evolution of terminology over the forty year course of his writing, particularly in regard to anthropological definition. There seems to be a gradual movement from an almost exclusively "carnal" depiction of self to--beginning about halfway through that period--the more balanced image of "mindbody." Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Poteat's analysis of the dynamically conceived primal self was largely in terms of the existential-linguistic implications of the personal pronoun "I", referring to the "logically extended concept I" and the "private self," but he also made frequent reference to the self as "body," "body-in-the-world," "being-in-our-own- bodies-in-the-world," and "carnal being"; in the late 1960s the less explicitly visceral "ground-meaning" and "ground being"; then, in the early 1970s, "concrete knower" and "human heart." We can find some precedence for Poteat's profoundly carnal challenge to discarnate Cartesianism in Polanyi's frequent references to brain physiology; for example, Polanyi's statement in *The Tacit Dimension*: "We may venture . . . to extend the scope of tacit knowing to include neural traces in the cortex of the nervous system" (15). (In similar fashion, Poteat later tells us that, for him "knowing [is] not one but many sorts of things"[*PP*, 80]). However suggestive Polanyi's extension of "knowing" to include observable, physiological, electro-chemical "traces" for a carnal depiction of self, he seems to have resisted translating his epistemological leap ("venture") into a corresponding anthropological leap. Poteat, most explicitly in the early period, makes this leap--at least terminologically: he quite readily refers to not just one dimension of the differentiated self, but to the undifferentiated self, the primal core or ground of selfhood, simply as "carnal being" or "body."

In so far as I can determine from surveying Professor Poteat's writings, it was not until 1973 ("Moustakas Within His Ambience," *PP*, 275) that he uses the term "mindbody" (also "psycho-somata") to refer to the primal self. This term, together with "mindbody in the world," and, perhaps the most frequently reiterated of all his phrases, the "sentient, motile, and oriented mindbody," sometimes including among these adjectives "tonic" and often completed by ". . . in the world," promptly permeates his writings, including all three of his books, from thereon. Where the more exclusively carnal imagery reappears, it tends to come with a caveat. For example, in 1974 he reminds the reader that "body," as he uses the term, has no extension: "Even my 'body' as *my* 'body' is not in space" (*PP*, 33). "Body," rather, is the paradigmatic, primordial *place*, the *whence* from which all orientation derives. Writing in 1992, when he presses to our most primal experience of the tensionality of our mindbodies, he points to the experiencing of our heartbeat (and even before that, our mother's "beating heart rhythmically [pumping] the blood of life through [our] foetal bodies"[*PP*, 275]). Even to apprehend our heartbeat as a *beat*, he reminds us, means attributing to our "flesh" a preconscious "imagining" and "remembering" in the form of its autonomic pretensions and retentions.

At this remove from ordinary awareness it is my *flesh* that imagines; my *flesh* that remembers--not

“flesh” as this is mediated through the categories of gross anatomy, physiology, molecular biology, but flesh as this appears unmediated in the tonality of my living mindbody (*RG*, ms).

And, of course, he has made it clear that this “carnal” “imagining” and “remembering” is not in the commonsense but derived (mediated) understanding that we have of these latter two terms.

It finally becomes evident to the reader that Poteat has loaded his terminology, from both ends (“mental” as well as “physical”), to its metaphorical limits; and that the earlier, less refined, more carnal terminology, “loaded” perhaps to excess, carried the same intent. In 1974, he offered another of his all-important (although, in a footnote) caveats: “It should go without saying that . . . ‘body’ as the ground of the primordial sense of space has, as well, a primordial sense not to be assimilated to any derived sense”(*PP*, 30). Poteat’s “It should go without saying . . .” certainly underscores the fact that he has held this assumption all along. Further, his existentially probing treatment of the pronoun “I” and of “person” makes this assumption, indeed, obvious. But now more comfortably subsumed under the dominating metaphor of “mindbody,” the same words--“body,” “carnal being,” etc.--are less jarring and less groping because of their more explicit reference, as we noted in his treatment of temporality, to a reconciled dualism.

By the time of publication of his first book, in 1985 (*Polanyian Meditations*), the concept of “body,” in its assumed, underived, primordial sense, had virtually yielded to the concept of “mindbody,” in its only, but identical--that is, underived, primordial--sense. Perhaps feeling that by now he has laid to rest in the minds of his readers any tendency to perceive “mind” in terms of abstracted, Cartesian--or other--idealism, he suggests functional considerations, perhaps not totally dissimilar from those that motivated his earlier retention of both “body” and “mindbody,” that would seem to justify his currently retaining both “mindbody” and “mind,” although his use of quotation marks around only the latter term indicates that “mind,” while rooted in the primordial mindbody, is nevertheless derived.

“Beliefs”, “valuations”, “assumptions”, “premises” are “held” not merely by the “mind”, whether reflected or reflectable, but also by the mindbody; . . . an assumption in the mindbody . . . is neither explicit nor, strictly, explicitable, and one in the “mind” . . . may be explicit but is certainly explicitable . . . (*PM*, 32).

In final analysis, it must be said that Professor Poteat has struggled admirably and with exceptional eloquence and success in applying our largely post-Cartesian--and only--articulate vocabulary to uncover and recover its pre-Cartesian roots in the pre-articulate sinews of our mindbodies.

Still, the problem of assigning full and commensurable reality to the ontologically derivative, and the related problem of ontological hierarchy, it seems to me, remains. Poteat has effectively challenged the discarnate rationalistic and alphabetic assumptions of both Cartesian idealism and Platonic logocentrism (to borrow from Derrida), and he has successfully addressed a number of other epistemological and anthropological problems. But more needs to be done in addressing some problems that arise, or remain, amidst his new and ground-breaking--better, ground-restoring--insights.

II: The Protensive “Radius”

Consciousness . . . requires . . . a center and periphery that are dialectically . . . in pretensive and

retrotransitive communion with each other (*PD*, 79).

Professor Poteat, like Polanyi, begins with the observation that all sentient life evidences, in various degrees of sophistication and evolution, an irresistible effort to detect and embody some kind of ordering principle, *arché*, or meaning in its being in the world. In all sentient life there appears to be a primal prejudice toward coherence, the “hanging togetherness of things.” In this sense, Poteat suggests, sentient life at its radix is “axiologically determined—that is, through and through ingenuously disposed toward value” (*PD*, 113). However, this is manifested not only in meaning-seeking but also in a prior meaning-discernment. There is a prereflectively *given* sense of value. At the level of human sentience, this primal orientation or sense of value is “in principle” beyond all doubt—unless, of course, one’s consciousness has been estranged, by abstraction, from its primal roots. Even at the lowest level of life, the vegetative, we can detect in its most archaic form such a “given” orienting or ordering of life in its “commitment” to function and growth. At the sentient level we observe the emergence of an “active-perceptive center” capable of appraisal, or meaning. For example, Polanyi tells us that

a floating amoeba will emit pseudopods in all directions until . . . when one of the pseudopods touches solid ground, all the others are drawn in and the whole mass of protoplasm is sent floating toward the new point of anchorage.³

At the level of intelligence, appraisal—or commitment—is made by a “consciously deliberative” center, which—in its highest, or human, expression—can be assigned responsibility. In other words, the prereflective givenness of a sense of value, at the human level of sentience, does not constitute commitment. Nor does it preclude the ongoing task of meaning-discernment and meaning-giving. Indeed, commitment is meaningless apart from my reflective explicitation or, to use Poteat’s terms, my “bodying forth” “asseverations” and my subsequent “standing behind,” these asseverations before others in the context of a specific time and specific place and specific circumstances. Both Polanyi and Poteat insist that it is only at this point of world-transcending willful commitment at this level, or mode, of moral existence, that I become “I”, that is, a person. But this takes us beyond the intended scope of this paper.

The point to be made in terms of these phylogenetic levels of existence—from the vegetative to the (merely) sentient (as in the case of the amoeba), to the intelligent, and the moral (in the human person)—is that at the highest level, that of human existence, *all* the levels are inextricably co-present, not only ontogenetically but at every given moment. As Polanyi states it, all explicit thought, even in its most formal expression, is tacitly grounded. Poteat, building upon Polanyi’s seminal concept of “boundary conditions,” represents the integration of these diverse levels in the human mind/body in dynamic terms:

I cannot explicitly say what it is to be a self (person) because it is always an integration of the particulars of my body-in-the-world with (from the natural standpoint) its many different levels of reality and the principles governing the integration of each level through the determination of the boundary conditions left open by the principles . . . at the next lower level. Also, it is an integration of all my skills And finally, it is the integration of all these to anticipatory, heuristic powers . . . (*PP*, 47, n. 4).

In as much as human *being* is inseparable from human *knowing* (this distinction itself an abstract, alphabetic dualism), the self is epistemologically and ontologically (again, an abstracted distinction) hierarchical. Therefore, “my language

is continuous with gesture, as gesture is continuous with [prereflective] sentience and orientation” (*PD*, 111). And our gestures, our elaborate musical or graphic art forms, our language, and even our most intricate mathematical theories not only have their primal origins but derive their present meanings from “the sinews of our bodies which had them first” (*RG*, ms).

At least by the time that life reaches the stage of animal existence and sentience, the vital meaning-discerning center of life, that is, mindbody, has--better: is--in addition to orientation, what Poteat characterizes as “tonicity” and “motility.” All three of these characterizations require a conceptualizing of mindbody as *distended in time*. However, as we have become aware of by now in reading Poteat, these last two (italicized) terms--like virtually all of his key terms--although inevitably the product of alphabetic literacy and loaded with discarnate post-Cartesian colorations, must not be interpreted in their conventional, second-order, alphabetically-abstracted meanings. Distention does not mean extension, and time does not mean duration. In other words, Poteat’s conception of mindbody involves neither spatial nor temporal extension.

Mindbodily distention--like temporality, a precondition of tonicity, according to Poteat--turns out to be characterized, as we have seen in the case of mindbodily temporality, precisely *in terms of* tonicity. We have apparently reached semantic bedrock in our depiction of the mindbody as “tonic,” “tensional.” The distended mindbody, we are told to think of as “infinitely dense,” with no extension, like a cosmic black hole. And the temporality of mindbody is similarly “infinitely compacted” by Poteat to include the past and the future contemporaneously “within” the present. The mindbody, although explicitable only in dimensional terms--that is, metaphorically--at its infinitely compacted, existential primal core, loses all dimensionality, becomes a point without extension. Its tonicity--again, not a characteristic that the mindbody *has*, but what it *is*--is best described in the dynamic concepts of latency, potency, energy, intentionality, protension. Indeed, our senses of “intending,” “stretching forth,” “reaching out,” we are told, are paradigmatically “given” in our prereflective mindbodies. Further: “Because of [its] *pretensions* there is a *not-yet* that is nevertheless contemporaneous with *now*; and because of [its] *retrotensions* there is a *no-longer* that is similarly contemporaneous with *now*” (*PD*, 106).⁴ By derivative (because temporally extended, not distended) analogy, we gain a sense of this in the experiencing of a melody through the co-presence, or contemporaneity, of the individual notes that comprise the melody by pretending and retrotending each other in our remembering and imagining, as the note G pretends C, as it retrotends E, and E pretends G as it retrotends what precedes it, etc.

But, having denied that our mindbodies can be characterized in terms of spatial or temporal extension, Poteat now insists that mindbody “does not exist in an instant,” just as the notes in a melody, in their co-presence, are not simultaneously sounded or heard; and, further, that mindbody is the paradigmatic case of “place.” To speak in terms of distention requires that we rely, although self-consciously--that is, with caution and metaphorically--upon second-order concepts of time and space. Again, it seems we have approached the inevitable point of semantic overload. (Poteat refers to this as the “surplus of meaning” that characterizes language, as acknowledged in metaphor, especially as we engage in reflexive contemplation). Poteat’s intention is clear: In as much as the self, the mindbody, is tensional, that is, meaning-discerning and meaning-giving, its reflective explicitation--to the limited extent that it *is* explicitable--can only be in terms of narrative, that is, in the context of a living history, both my own and the world’s. And, again because of the mindbody’s axiological, meaning-discerning and meaning-giving nature, it can be understood only in reference to “where” it is “at home”--that is, in the context of that part of the world, those places, objects, and events upon which it has (I have) left its (my) imprint and which most closely comport with, reflect, embody, its prereflective, archaic sense of meaning.

Just as the effort to articulate the meaning of self, or mindbody, inevitably involves us in concepts of temporal and spatial dimensionality, those that seem to be the most elucidating are those concepts or images that can accommodate the dynamics of pretension and retension, that is, the lively mindbodily activity of dwelling in its prereflective center and the outward projection of meaning thus derived. The image of a circle, or sphere, with its center and circumference, or periphery, immediately suggests itself. "Consciousness," Poteat suggests, "requires at any given moment a center and periphery that are dialectically . . . in pretensive and retentive communion with each other" (*PD*, 79). We indicated earlier that the primal, axiologically radical mindbody cannot be objectified. Ultimately this prereflective "radix of all meaning and meaning-discernment" can only be experienced directly in the act of indwelling and referred to, indirectly, through those "objects" or events in the world that the self distinguishes in terms of its previously inexplicit, sometimes inexplicable, mindbodily motifs. We are reminded of the Polanyian insight that the meanings we indwell subsidiarily tend to be "displaced away from ourselves" (*TD*, 13), as the sensations in the palm of my hand are experienced in terms of the world that presents itself at the end of my probe. Or Polanyi's suggestion that we can know the particulars in which we dwell with tacit awareness only through the joint meaning that is achieved by their convergence as we direct our attention from, or through, them to the more comprehensive object on which we focus. At our primal core, Poteat reminds us, there is no separation between fact and value. The articulation, or "bodying forth" of our mindbodily meanings confers facticity--in a sense, involves us in "creating" a world--"outside" our prereflective, undifferentiated mindbodily centers. Conscious reflection, in other words, presents us with a sense of "other," a world over against the self.

There is nothing "illicit," Poteat assures us, about this conceptual dualism, even though it is an abstraction from the more immediate, prereflectively "given" and therefore less differentiated (from the reflective perspective, *undifferentiated*) protensions of the archaic mindbody. "Licit" in the sense that even a conscious reflective "knowing" of the mindbody as it situates itself in a larger "world" need not estrange itself from its prereflective center. Consciousness, whether "licit" or "illicit," requires at each moment a continuing shifting between retro- and pre-tensive awarenesses; between, respectively, the mindbodily grounding center and that which it focally apprehends on the protensive periphery. But as the distance increases between center and periphery, and the protensive "radius" becomes stretched to the extent that the "world" at the periphery loses contact with its primal meaning-seeking and meaning-conferring logos (we might say that, at this point, it has become qualitatively, or axiologically, "decontextualized") and thus deprived of its vitality, the world thus abstracted becomes static, dead, merely quantified and extended space and time.

My parenthetical comment in the previous paragraph suggests that there are indications in Poteat's thought that when he refers to the tacit, or prereflective, level of awareness as "undifferentiated," he intends a *relative* distinction; and that the protensive dynamic he finds in *all* levels of life, even in the orienting and growth-directing functions of vegetative life, precludes the stasis that would accompany an absolutely undifferentiated state of existence. Both he and Polanyi have clearly stated that life is inherently ontologically hierarchical. Even the single-celled protozoan exists as a life form because of a complex juxtaposition of molecular, chemical, and organic principles in dynamic and supportive relation to each other through a hierarchy of boundary conditions. And where there is hierarchy, there is differentiation. All the more so in the case of the human mindbody, even at its prereflective radix. "My being," Poteat suggests, is marked by a pretensive/retentive cadence "far below the level of ordinary awareness" (*RG*, ms). And he describes our tacit "knowing" in terms of "archaic and usually unreflected hierarchies" (*PM*, 193). He vividly reflects upon his own process of bringing words into existence: there is a sense of incipient, tacit

differentiation just prior to their emergence into articulated differentiation. Even though the mindbody is generally depicted as the “whence” of the protensive dialectic--not its explicit focus--that is, the “arena” of prereflective indwelling, Poteat curiously alludes to the mindbody’s “prereflective apprehending of itself” by “attending to” itself (*PM*, 221). What this seems to suggest is that even our act of indwelling is experienced as a prereflective but nevertheless protensive dialectic and therefore involves the degree of differentiation required for a tacit, prearticulate orientation or “focusing,” that is both primal and paradigmatic relative to what we experience in our abstracted reflection.

It is always the concrete “undifferentiated,” prereflective and retrotended pole of our pretensive dialectic that is paradigmatic, in Poteat’s thinking, for our abstracted, “differentiated,” pretensive reflections. “Formalized rationality . . . derives from and remains parasitical upon [our] ‘sense making’,” . . . our prereflective intimations of a “‘hanging togetherness’,” (*PM*, 9) of “‘rules of procedure’ and ‘substantial beliefs about the nature of things’,” (*PM*, 12) of which we can be certain (*PP*, 46-47), but “which we cannot or at least do not [reflectively, explicitly] know and, in any case, may not, cannot, need not know prior to the beginning of an inquiry” (*PM*, 12). Interestingly, this latter observation, that we cannot know our primal beliefs *prior to* the course of our reflection, leaves open the question of what effect the reflective process may have upon the character and quality of our prereflective intimations.

There is no question that at our most inner core, at that dimensionless point of “infinite density” of our being and knowing, our awareness can only be in its fullest state of prereflective, undifferentiated concretion. But even the dichotomy suggested by “prereflective” versus “reflective” belies the underlying continuity of sentience. Poteat acknowledges this by occasionally substituting for “prereflection” and “reflection” the common term “knowing” and placing that word within quotation marks only when alluding to prereflection. The distinction between, or among, the mindbody’s levels of awareness is better represented in terms of a gradient than in terms of boundaries.

However, as we indicated earlier in addressing the problem of dualisms, in reflective thought we inevitably find that we cannot avoid thinking and speaking in conceptual differentiations, dualistic or other. To recognize the temporal dynamic of mindbody, we find that conceptualizing this dynamic in terms of a dialectic, in the terminology of “pretension” and “retrotension,” is helpful. And these latter terms invariably point us to that which we pretend, or imagine (the “object” of our focus), and that which we retrotend, or indwell. Therefore the terminology of “boundaries” can also be useful, as long as we remind ourselves of its abstraction from the more fundamental continuum of all awareness.

To think *is* to abstract. And, at the human level of our mindbodily existence, it is merely an extension of the mindbody’s innate attempt to find coherence and meaning, to seek a reality commensurate with the “given” order that *is* its most inner, archaic being. Professor Poteat tells us that “only when our usual devices do not issue in that coherence demanded by our intentional mindbodies in the world . . . do we adopt a more reflective mode” (*RG*, ms). In strictly vegetative forms of life the protensive energies--limited as they are to anticipating and reacting to the needs of growth and the functions of self-maintenance--are easily confined within the closely drawn “boundaries” of a prereflective organism. In low-level sentient animal systems, the added demands of motility are similarly easily met by the prereflective mode of knowing and being.

But at the human level of existence, the universal quest for coherence is not so easily met. It appears that the task of bringing coherence and meaning to a “world” greatly enlarged and complicated by man’s expanded prereflective awareness requires the extension of his/her protensive energies beyond their prereflective radius. Evolving

consciousness, with its increasing reflexive sense of its own protensive activity, becomes increasingly aware, in its prereflective dialectic, of what we have come to know through Gödel regarding our most abstracted reflections: namely, that neither the coherence of our thought nor the meaning/rationale for its fundamental orienting principles can be grasped (even when sensed primordially) without advancing to a higher and more encompassing mode of thought. But long before we arrived at the highly abstracted mode represented by mathematics, the human quest for meaning had reached the limits--run up against the boundary conditions--of the prereflective mode. To the human intellect it is apparent that the "given" prereflective sense (what Poteat, in the previous quotation, refers to as "our usual devices") of "hanging togetherness" does not suffice, and reflection must complement it.

Reflection does not *supplant* the tacit, prereflective process, but carries it further. Both the recognition and the resolution of incoherence remain rooted in the prereflective mindbody. Underscoring this, Poteat reclaims from our post-Cartesian, alphabetic culture its constrained use of the word "criticism" (a usage both he and Polanyi had employed, without challenging, in their books' subtitles, until Poteat's *RG*) and expands it (arguably, even *beyond* its etymological roots in the Greek *kritikos*) to include the tacit and prereflective: "Criticism is the tacit, mindbodily recognition of incoherence in the course of my quest for coherence. This criticism is incessantly being carried out instantaneously in my mindbody" (*RG*, ms). In the light of this "criticism," the mindbody prereflectively engages in the task of discerning and creating greater coherence by grasping and forming gestalts: "Seeking coherence is the feat of grasping gestalts [and] dissolving them for the sake of a more inclusive coherence" (*RG*, ms).

However, as we have noted, this process must be carried into reflection. At this level, Poteat speaks of the task of theory construction. "Theories" include not only what is usually assumed by that term, but also works of art and architecture, musical compositions, maps, metaphors, language, even gesture--for all of these, like gestalts at the prereflective level, serve to provide us with a sense of meaning and coherence. "Theoretical" reflection, in any of these forms, facilitates the task of bringing coherence to the world of man's expanded awareness because theory, by systematically and selectively contracting the *scale* of the particulars of our experience, is able simultaneously to enlarge the *scope* of our experience, our vision, in the same way that a map, by reducing the number of geographical entities to be represented and the distances between these entities (cities, rivers, etc.), can give us a comprehensive view of a country that would be unattainable if we had to look at it "full scale," standing in the middle of it. Similarly language, in addition to the creative potential represented by the richness of its grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and etymology, by introducing abstract, general terms that vastly reduce the number of "tokens" we would otherwise have to commit to memory, enhances our control over our prelingual experience.

Reflection, therefore--in answer to our earlier query--clearly enriches our prereflective intimations. And to the extent that the reflected and the prereflected are dialectically related in pre- and retro-tension, does it not make sense to suggest that certain prereflective awarenesses are thereby raised to a higher (less undifferentiated) prereflective level, and that some are actually brought to the level of reflection? It is in this sense, it seems to me, that one can make sense of Poteat's assignment of full reality to that which is derivative, that is, abstracted in reflection. For our abstractions--as long as they have not stretched their bonds of retrotension so far that they break from that archaic center which both initiates and continues to give primal direction and sustenance to our quest for coherence--substantively contribute to that quest. They have no less, and no less legitimate, claim--as an integral part of the pretensive and retrotensive "activity" that *I am* in the world, and as an integral part of the prereflective and reflective continuum that I similarly represent--in determining who we are, mindbodily in the world. However, because our reflections are always

derivative, they cannot be paradigmatic in the *ultimate* sense in which Poteat appears to employ that term.

Yet, from a *penultimate* perspective, it would not seem--from what we have just said--inappropriate to refer to our pretending/retrotending reflection as paradigmatic. To the extent that our reflective efforts succeed in achieving a greater degree of integration and coherence, as, for example, in our "theory" building (what we might call the "formalizing of gestalts"), and this, in turn, enforms or enriches our prereflective awareness (in the sense that Polanyi suggests that our focal awareness gives meaning to our subsidiary, tacit awareness; or that the higher ontological level of being--for example, the biological--provides the organizing principles for the next lower, the chemical-molecular, through the boundary conditions left open by the lower), reflection reflexively impacts upon our prereflective process "of grasping gestalts [and] dissolving them for the sake of a more inclusive coherence" (*RG*, ms).

But this recognition of the dialectical relationship between the reflective and the prereflective processes does not support Polanyi's assertion that

logical antecedents derived from the prior acceptance of their consequents are necessarily less certain than the consequents. It is clearly unreasonable, therefore, to regard these antecedents as the grounds on which we accept their consequents (*PK*, 192) .

Ultimately, it is our prereflective, tacit awareness that is paradigmatic. Poteat's, to my knowledge, *only* rebuttal of Polanyi is warranted--that, contrary to his own articulated epistemological assumptions and intentions, he has unwittingly slipped back into the Enlightenment perspective which equates certainty with clarity, and logic with explicit formalism (*PM*, 229). What I am suggesting must be amended to this critique, however--and is suggested by Poteat in other contexts--is Polanyi's recognition, in the above quotation, that the dialectic of our prereflective and reflective processes *is* a dialectic, that is, a relationship of mutual influence.⁵ Not only do our prereflections give form and meaning to our reflections, but our reflections, *having thus been derived and influenced*, in turn influence our tacit, prereflective awareness. Is this not a reasonable interpretation of Poteat (if we read "silence" to mean the prereflected and "speech" to refer to the reflected) when he says, "It is silence which gives to speech its depth; it is speech which gives to silence its weight" (*PP*, 262). I do not think that I am retreating to Enlightenment captivity when I venture to suggest that the nature of the influence of our reflections upon their prereflective ground might, guardedly, be described as the evolving of our tacit gestalts in the direction of less *undifferentiation* (in *this prereflective* sense, more clarity). This does not increase the *certainty* with which we hold our tacit "beliefs." Whatever certainty we have always remains radically fiducial. But it enhances our ability to "know" that which we hold as certain; and, indeed, to know (without quotation marks) *explicitly* to the extent that our tacit gestalts are moved by our reflective retrotension across the threshold of the tacit into reflection, that is, the articulable. This latter development Poteat clearly acknowledges:

I now accept a reflected formulation of my hitherto *tacit* believings, *after the fact of my having relied upon them* as the (logical/ontological) grounds of my coming to achieve my presently *explicit* beliefs, because now I have come to see *these* believings to be implied in my presently achieved explicit beliefs (*RG*, ms).

Endnotes

¹ Most of these articles are included in J. Stines and J. Nickell (eds.), *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993), hereafter referred to as *PP*. Poteat's chapter, "Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology and Action: Some Polanyian Meditations" in T. Langford and W. Poteat (eds.), *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1968), is included in *The Primacy of Persons*. Poteat's three books are: *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985), hereafter referred to as *PM*; *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1990), hereafter referred to as *PD*; and *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Anamnesis* (hereafter referred to as *RG*, ms), due for publication by the State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, in 1994. Because at the time of writing I had available to me only the manuscript copy of *Recovering the Ground*, my citing of this work lacks page references.

² *Orthodoxy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 96-97.

³ "The Nature of Scientific Convictions," *Psychological Issues*, v.8, no.4, monograph 32 (1974), 62.

⁴ "Pretension" and "retrotension," key terms for elucidating Poteat's concept of mindbodily tonicity, or temporal distension, do not appear in his works until 1985, in *PM*.

⁵ Professor Poteat wrote in 1992: "I am first and last--and all the time in between--an intentional mindbody in the world dialectically moving back and forth between the pre-reflective and reflection" (*RG*, ms).

Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to "owner-polanyi@sbu.edu" to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.

Poteat on Modern Culture and Critical Philosophy

E. M. Adams

ABSTRACT Key words: mindbodily experience, lived experience, cultural derangement, Enlightenment, critical philosophy, cartesian rationality, bourgeois form of life, materialistic values, humanistic values, naturalistic worldview, scientific descriptive/explanatory conceptual system, humanistic framework of thought, unreflected worldview, humanistic worldview.

While agreeing with Poteat that the modern Western culture has gone awry in a humanly destructive way, the paper contends that the culprit was not, as Poteat claims, Enlightenment critical philosophy, but the materialistic values of the bourgeois form of life and the puritanical view of knowledge and the naturalistic worldview that they generated. Accordingly, the solution proposed is not Poteat's unreflected experience and commonsense worldview but a shift to a humanistic culture-generating stance and a critical humanistic philosophy.

William H. Poteat's major work, *Polanyian Meditations* (1985), is a learned book that dares to challenge the foundations of modern Western civilization and to chart a new course by excavating and calling us back to what he takes to be the foundations of all civilization, namely, "the 'hanging togetherness' and 'sense-making' of our integral mindbodily rootedness in the as yet unreflected world and in our unreflected 'thinkings' and doings in that world" (*PM*, p. 9).

Like many others, Poteat has felt keenly the problems of the human self in the disenchanting world defined by our modern cultural perspective. He speaks of the Enlightenment (sometimes he includes the Renaissance and the Reformation, but his emphasis is on the Enlightenment) as having drawn a veil between us and ourselves (*PM*, p. 2). "[W]hat I had taken for 'real life' was crusted over and skewed," he says, "by acritically held images and values deriving from uncriticized Enlightenment criticism" (*Philosophical Daybook* [1990], p. 3). He contends that our culture has discredited **real** life, that is, "life that is potent with the unacknowledged configurations of meaning, coherence, order, and value," because "its articulation was never the outcome of a skeptically induced inquiry--mandatory since the *Discourse* of Descartes--and therefore could not command the authority and epistemological weight--or even interest--of the repertoire of the philosophical tradition" (*PD*, p. 3).

In his long disquiet with our modern culture and his search for an alternative way of understanding the human condition, Poteat has found himself resonating with Pascal, Kierkegaard, Hanna Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and especially the later Wittgenstein and Polanyi. Nourished by insights from these and other like-minded rebels against the modern mind, Poteat has developed his own way of uncovering and liberating himself and recovering the culture in which he can dwell with the full richness and wholeness of life that human selfhood demands. Basically he attempts to return us with confidence to the unreflected configurations of meaning, value, and order in our "mindbodily" commerce and negotiations with the world in our ordinary pursuits in living our lives.

In speaking of the imaginary/real, fiction/history, figurative/direct, metaphorical/literal, mythos/logos distinctions, Poteat rejects the view that we dwell in only the second of these pairs. He asks, "Is not having and being in a world precisely to dwell alternately and often richly simultaneously, but never less than fully, in both terms of each of these pairs?"

Indeed, is not the tension among these pairs in which we simultaneously dwell the very source of our existential tonus, our mindbodily oriented presence?" (*PD*, pp. 7-8). "Even so," he goes on to say, "our ingenuous and acritical confidence in the integrity of the world so appropriated. . . is in jeopardy to the supposition that only that is really real which is the *terminus ad quem*, quite narrowly construed, of a name-relation theory of meaning" (*PD*, pp. 7-8).

The central thesis of his philosophy is succinctly stated: "All our acts of indication, including our mathematical ones, possess a semantic and 'ontological' thrust, since they are grounded in and are archaically warranted by our existent, intentional mindbodies" (*PM*, p. 225); and the world we live in is "the progeny of all of the world-forming powers of our intentional mindbodily beings--from our breathing in and breathing out, to the styles of our gaits, to the rhythm and timbre of our speech, to our song and dance, to all of our ordinary knowings and doings, to our practice of mathematical heuristics, etc., with no **in principle** assignment of special privilege and authority, where world-formation is concerned, to any one of these powers" (*PD*, p. 16).

I applaud much of Poteat's criticism of our cultural situation and his support for the configurations inherent in lived experience. For many years I have contended that the modern Western mind is deranged: that our restricted, puritanical epistemological views have undermined the humanistic culture in terms of which we live our lives and run our institutions, and that they have given rise to an intellectual vision of humankind and the world that will not sustain the human spirit or a great civilization. Indeed, I have argued that our reigning epistemological views have eroded the foundations of society and generated such an impoverished worldview that we have mutilated and dehumanized ourselves by the intellectual reprocessing required to place ourselves in the world in a way that would make our existence intelligible. In all of this, I am on common ground with Poteat. He is one of the most literate philosophers of our time and a man who has thought deeply about the profoundest problems of the modern age. *Polanyian Meditations*, as I said in a prepublication appraisal that is quoted on the jacket of the book, is "a work of inspiration with marks of genius."

Nevertheless, there are some things about Poteat's position that bother me and this would not be an honest appraisal without airing them. I have trouble with his etiology of our cultural derangement and our differences here have a bearing on the appropriate therapy.

The Derangement of the Modern Western Mind

Like Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981), Alan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), James O. Wilson in *The Moral Sense* (1993), and some other recent critics of our cultural situation, Poteat thinks that certain intellectuals have led the culture astray with a false image of how we make sense of things. The chief culprits according to MacIntyre and Bloom were Nietzsche and the intellectuals who were influenced by him; for Wilson, the culprits were the Logical Positivists. For Poteat, the trouble began in the seventeenth century with Descartes whom he thinks captured the modern mind with a perverting image of rationality.

Poteat seems to accept Wittgenstein's view that philosophers often pervert the culture by misunderstanding ordinary discourse and forms of life and that the only legitimate task for them is to undo the mischief philosophers have already done by correct descriptions of our ordinary ways of experience and thought that leave our unreflected thinkings and doings as they were. "When we do philosophy," Wittgenstein said, "we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions" (*Philosophical Investigations*, para. 194). Philosophy, Wittgenstein contends, "is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by

means of language. . . . [It] may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe” (*Ibid.*, paras. 109, 124).

Poteat seems to think that the Enlightenment philosophers (especially Descartes) and the philosophical tradition emanating from them are the chief culprits in our modern cultural derangement. For more than three hundred years, Westerners, he thinks, have been captives of the Cartesian Enlightenment mathematical/logical image of rationality and the idea that nothing is acceptable unless it passes muster under reflective criticism. The cultural results, he thinks, have been humanly devastating, for we have a culture in which human beings cannot thrive and a worldview which provides no place for human beings with their freedom and dignity.

It was, Poteat thinks, the identification of the self with the subject of theoretical thinking of the Cartesian sort that generated Descartes’ view of the discarnate mind. In order to recover the full human self involved in all the rich overlapping layers of experience, thought, and action involved in the full spectrum of human concerns and in ordinary living, Poteat emphasizes our indivisible mindbodily existence in the multidimensional world present to us in all our intentional modalities.

I have several misgivings about this account. I do not find the Cartesian view of rationality prevalent even among the intellectuals of the modern age. Of course Descartes did foster a school of rationalism in the seventeenth century, but the empiricists have been more at home in and recognized by the culture in subsequent centuries. Descartes, of course, made a major contribution to mathematics and helped prepare the way for Newtonian physics. And Poteat is certainly right in holding that Descartes is the father of modern Critical philosophy. He made an important philosophical contribution to the Enlightenment by holding that all beliefs should be held accountable to rational scrutiny. But that, I suggest, was an inevitable response to the contradictions already developing in the culture.

Poteat is particularly concerned to discredit Descartes’ theory of a discarnate mind. But certainly Descartes had no copyright on the theory. It was an ancient Greek idea that has come down to us through some strands of Christianity. Origin, in the third century, said, for instance, that “mind, for its movements or operations needs no physical space, nor sensible magnitude, nor bodily shape, nor color, nor any other . . . properties of bodies or matter.” This, he says, “is certain from observation of our own mind.” But what is more important, the discarnate-mind theory has not fared well in our modern culture. Ever since Thomas Hobbes, a contemporary of Descartes, the movement has been more toward some form of physicalism, except for the nineteenth-century idealism of the Romantic revolt against the Enlightenment and its twentieth-century successors, phenomenology and existentialism.

A deeper worry that I have is whether philosophers ever have the kind of cultural influence Poteat and other recent cultural critics have attributed to them. Hegel was nearer right, I think, when he said that the Owl of Minerva takes her flight at dusk. The job of philosophy, according to my view, is to articulate trouble-causing assumptions and presuppositions already operative in the culture and to work for coherence in the foundations of the culture and a valid unified worldview. Philosophers do, of course, influence the culture. In stable times, the ones who usually get a hearing are those who provide intellectual support for the prevailing culture and its worldview. Philosophical critics of the established order do not get much of a hearing unless they give form and voice to an already existing discontent. Philosophers have their greatest influence in revolutionary times by helping to discredit and to exorcise the views and assumptions of the passing era or those of a decaying power structure, and by bringing clarification to, and providing intellectual support for, the views and assumptions that underwrite a revolutionary movement or an emerging culture. Philosophers, for example, played a major role in the late Medieval and the early modern period in the unraveling of Christian feudalism and the rise of modern Western

Civilization. But the philosophers were not the initiators of this revolution. New philosophical ideas take root only in a culture that is already groping toward them or is at least in an unstable condition that makes it vulnerable to them.

The great revolution in Western civilization that gave rise to our modern culture was caused, according to my understanding, by a shift in the governing values of the society. In most classical cultures, although they were often power-driven and barbaric, the dominant culture was shaped largely by a concern for humanistic values--values grounded in the needs of selfhood and society: the need for a stable social order, shared values, group loyalty, justice, security, and a normative place in which one feels "at home" and needed; the need for a worthy identity, a normative self-concept that defines for one a life with normative requirements and limits; the need for a sense of self-worth, self-respect, and the respect of others; the need to love and to be loved; the need for beauty, understanding, meaningful experiences and activities; the need for meaningful work, self-expression, and self-fulfillment; the need for family, community and cooperation; the need for a historical and metaphysical context in which one's life is meaningful; and so forth. In these classical cultures, the modes of thought and expression in religion, history, morality, art, and politics dominated the intellectual life and shaped the culture's vision of humankind and the world.

Modern Western culture was generated not so much by the work of philosophers as by the development of a new form of life, what we may call bourgeois life, focused on materialistic values--values grounded in our materialistic needs, that is, needs that lend themselves to satisfaction by manipulation, exploitation, and control of the conditions of our existence. Our culture-generating priorities shifted from concern with who we are and what reality requires of us to concern with getting what we want and imposing our will on the world; and, with this shift in our conception of the human enterprise, there was a corresponding shift in our way of understanding the world, a shift from a humanistic to a naturalistic worldview.

Under the priorities of the rising bourgeois class and the nation-state, Knowledge came to be conceived as the key to how to make, to remake, and to control things; it became identified with Promethean power. Intellectual inspiration came not from religion, art, morality, history, and politics as in the past, but from the crafts. With intellectual enlightenment, the crafts were elevated to technology; and with the marriage of science and the practical arts, science itself underwent a radical transformation. The basis of knowledge shifted to sensory observation; the ultimate test of knowledge became its application in making and remaking things and in intervening in and controlling natural processes. The descriptive/explanatory language of science was purified of all humanistic concepts, especially the central concepts of value and meaning; and the idea of ends, structures of meaning, and normative laws in nature were dismissed as superstitions, leaving nature a purely physical system open to our exploitation without any normative limits on our will. With the success of science in our technological/industrial, bourgeois civilization, it has come to be the ideal of knowledge and we seek to bring all subject matter, including ourselves and social and cultural phenomena, under its descriptive/explanatory conceptual system. So the humanistically purified worldview presupposed by modern empirical science has become our culture's dominant worldview. It dominates our intellectual life and our practical endeavors, and it is pervasive in our educational system.

Yet we cannot be human beings, live our lives, or run our institutions without thinking of ourselves, our activities, our culture, and institutions in humanistic terms. Even the doing of science presupposes the humanistic framework of thought. Although he puts the matter somewhat differently, I take this to be the most significant point that Poteat makes. And he is certainly right and he makes the point most forcefully.

But I submit that the derangement of our modern Western culture that threatens our humanity and the social order was generated, not by false images or theories of philosophers, but by the presuppositions of two forms of life, one inherently

and inescapably human and the other historically generated. Descartes is rightly called the father of modern philosophy, not so much because his ideas were implanted in the culture, but because he is one of the first great thinkers to be sensitive to and to wrestle with the contradictions and antinomies deep in the emerging culture. He did not, I suggest, derive the idea of a discarnate mind as the subject of abstract theoretical thinking, but rather seized upon the old idea of a discarnate mind as the subject matter of humanistic thought, leaving a dehumanized physical realm, including the human body, the subject matter of the new dehumanized scientific way of thought. In other words, he sought to resolve the tension in the culture between the humanistic and the new scientific ways of thought by dividing the world, including human beings, into mental and physical substances. Although his theory is not satisfactory and it has rightly been criticized, Descartes should not be blamed for the problems he was trying to solve. It was not his ideas that have beset the modern mind, but his problems. They are still with us and philosophers are still wrestling with them, not with Descartes.

Critical Philosophy

In his search for a post-Critical philosophy, Poteat thinks, if I understand him correctly, that the way experience and life are formed and the world is appropriated in our unreflected mindbodily being and living are unproblematic. This is similar to Wittgenstein's view that the culture is alright as long as it is grounded in a form of life that has not been messed up by reflective misunderstandings and philosophical theories. In other words, there are no genuine philosophical problems; there is no legitimate theoretical job for philosophy; its real function is to save the culture from the mischief reflection and philosophical theories do by exposing the reflective misunderstandings that generated the alleged philosophical problems the theories were constructed to solve. But unlike Wittgenstein, Poteat seems to focus on only Enlightenment philosophy and its progeny. He seems to think that if we could rid our culture of the perversions caused by modern Critical philosophy (which he dates from Descartes), we would have a philosophically unproblematic culture.

But surely the pre-Enlightenment culture of the West had its philosophical problems and was crusted over or even permeated with philosophical theories, mostly springing from the ancient Greek Enlightenment. The development of mathematics in ancient Greece generated philosophical problems that engaged the classical Greek philosophers, especially the Pythagoreans, Parmenides, and Plato, much as the development of modern empirical science gave rise to the Critical philosophy of the modern Enlightenment. The introduction of Judaism and Christianity into Hellenistic culture gave rise to the philosophical theology of Philo, Clement, Origin, St. Augustine, and others. There is some point to Nietzsche's charge that Christianity is "vulgar Platonism." Cultural pluralism inevitably raises philosophical questions about morality as it did with the Sophists in ancient Greece. Even differences in kind among beliefs and judgments, the simple facts of grammar, arouse philosophical reflection that spawn philosophical theories. No culture is immune to philosophical perplexities. Indeed, rational beings with critical reflective powers are always vulnerable to philosophical perplexity in any culture.

If our culture were purged of the modern Enlightenment-based philosophical misunderstandings and theories, it would be still a reflected culture; and if, I am right, it would embody not only the scars of earlier philosophical controversies and the marks of classical philosophical theories, but it would harbor its own philosophical perplexities, especially the contradictions that hold between the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of lived experience (the configurations of experience and the world in our mindbodily being, living, and thinking) on one hand and the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of modern empirical science, technology, and our science-based practical endeavors.

Of course Wittgenstein is partly right. Many philosophical perplexities can be solved or resolved without any

reconstruction of the culture. But this is not true of those philosophical perplexities grounded in contradictions among the presuppositions of the culture, especially those grounded in different forms of life. This is the case, I submit, with the typical problems that have engaged the Critical philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors even unto this day. These problems have been intractable because they are grounded in our ways of life. They do not admit of a purely intellectual solution. Nothing would suffice short of a radical transformation of the culture by a shift in our culture-generating stance--a shift in our governing priorities from materialistic to humanistic values. Only with such a shift would our ways of thought change. Philosophers may help us make the change by exposing the problems and locating their source and their solution, but the society may have to confront painfully the absurdities of the culture and the human consequences of its conflicting ways of life before it will take the problems in the foundations of the culture seriously.

Poteat is right, in my judgment, in calling our attention to the priority of our inescapable mindbodily engagement with the world in lived experience and the way in which the self and the world are categorially configured in this orientation. And he is right also in his claim that the tacit epistemological and metaphysical categories in this approach cannot be consistently denied, for they are presupposed in all of our thinking and doing. But, given the power and the standing our materialistic values give to the categorial configurations inherent in the scientific/technological/practical stance of modern culture, it is not enough to point these things out, not even so elegantly and persuasively as Poteat does.

We need detailed arguments against the widespread modern claim that, although lived experience involves the full structure of "subjectivity" reported in folk psychology, only sensory experience and manipulatory action and thought grounded in and validated by them provide us with an objective account of reality. We also need refutation of the further claim that the contradiction Poteat points out in the rejection of the categories of lived experience is only apparent. Such a task would involve articulation and detailed argument for the objective validity of the tacit configurations in our full mindbodily living. Furthermore, this task would require either a reconstruction of the categorial framework and methodology of science or a way of accommodating and explaining science in the larger humanistic framework of thought.

Enlightenment Critical philosophy arose as an intellectual response to the felt contradictions in the foundations of the emerging bourgeois culture. It has, for the most part, tried to achieve coherence in the foundations of the culture in a way that would not alter the direction of modern civilization. What we need, in my judgment, is not the abandonment of Critical philosophy but Critical philosophy rightly done and in a way that would be effective in bringing critical intelligence into the reconstruction of the culture. This is a big order indeed. It requires, as already indicated, detailed philosophical validation of the implicit categorial configurations in lived experience over against the rival presuppositions of our scientific/technological/practical stance; but even this would not be enough.

Whatever results philosophers achieve are likely to remain their secret. For philosophy to be effectual, it must join with other forces in the culture and become part of public discourse. Among its natural allies, the humanities, education, religion, and political thought are the most likely to be helpful. Historically science would have been a natural ally, but given its form and status in our culture, it offers mostly resistance to the kind of cultural transformation that is needed. Science will not change course unless it fails or reaches its limits in its culturally defined task or the cultural values that shape its framework of thought undergo a radical change. Philosophers must come out of the closet and engage other intellectual disciplines in the critical examination of their foundations; and they must come out of the ivory tower and engage the society at large in cultural criticism, with emphasis on the organizing and governing values of modern Western civilization and their cultural and human consequences, and with special emphasis on the validity and priority of humanistic values and ways of thought in human affairs.

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