

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.

Phil Mullins
Missouri Western State College
St. Joseph, Missouri 64507
Fax (816) 271-4574
e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu

Walter Gulick
Eastern Montana College
Billings, Montana 59101
Fax (406) 657-2037