

Salto Mortale: Poteat and the Righting of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT Key Words: agency, commitment, heuristics, F. H. Jacobi, Michael Polanyi, William H. Poteat, *salto mortale*.

Ranging himself against philosophical and theological traditions that he considered “bankrupt,” William H. Poteat sought to set philosophy back on its feet by exemplifying the way one might reason philosophically from a different set of assumptions. His project can, in this respect, be usefully compared to that of F. H. Jacobi two centuries earlier. Poteat and Michael Polanyi offered attuned critiques of philosophical presuppositions and practices. Constructively, both were committed to bringing home the agent and knower who had been evacuated by depersonalized and abstracted accounts of being and knowing.

Suppose that philosophers really are “out of their senses” and really do “walk on their heads.” Suppose, furthermore, that you are almost alone in being able to perceive the pathos of their impaired cranial hopping. Heads downward, their feet treading air, their heels where their ears should be, they see everything upside down, including you. With dogmatic certitude, they trade and sparkle among themselves, dismissing you as a crank, if they notice you at all. What would you do? What intellectual (and moral) *obligation* would you have? In considering the contribution of William H. Poteat (even—or perhaps especially—when the matter of particular interest is the relation of his work to that of Michael Polanyi), this is where we must begin, because this is where he, rightly or wrongly, began.

It was Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, two centuries before Poteat, who surveyed his philosophical colleagues and complained, “It is as if I saw people walking on their heads while they shout at the top of their voices: ‘Hop! Hop!’ and ‘Hop away from the heretic who, scornful of the head, remains standing on his feet!’”¹ Poteat and Jacobi are alike in at least this: they are both powerful critics, able to discern not just local and reparable oversights and inconsistencies in this or that philosophical argument, but also the invidious and infectious implications of the foundational assumptions upon which philosophical analyses are built. They are also alike in thinking that philosophy can only be put right by beginning from different assumptions. Jacobi’s invitation to Lessing—that he perform the acrobatic feat of a *salto mortale* in order to somersault from an inverted to an upright position—images Poteat’s own diagnosis and prescription with respect to modern philosophy.²

This comparison with Jacobi is not justified by anything in Poteat’s biography. I do not recall Poteat ever making reference to Jacobi in his writings or in conversation (although I do distinctly remember his describing philosophers as “walking on their heads”). I bring the two into conjunction simply because their improbable likenesses help us to see why the work of Michael Polanyi engaged Poteat to the extent that it did. I would be surprised if Poteat ever doubted for a moment that it was he who was “right side up,” but he also knew he was looking out at a veritable sea of eye-level boot laces. There were a few others, though, who also had the ground under their feet, and he gravitated to them as allies. That is why figures like Polanyi, Ludwig Wittgenstein, George Steiner, and Søren Kierkegaard were so particularly important as anchors in Poteat’s philosophical and pedagogical program. That Polanyi enjoyed pride of place among these confederates is plain not only from the

title of and prologue to *Polanyian Meditations* but also from earlier essays. For example, in “George Steiner: Extra-Territorial Critic,” after both expressing his appreciation of Steiner’s insight and faulting Steiner for “loss of nerve,” he contrasts Steiner’s work with those who do not succumb to the “evasions” of critical thought and who “have explicitly moved to *post-critical* options.” He names Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but “most of all Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*.”³

It is certainly true that Poteat did not think of himself as a student or interpreter of Polanyi or any of the others; his calling was not to become a commentator explaining, defending, and embroidering the work of someone else. But as peers, they provided confirmation of his fundamental critique; they were witnesses, like himself, to the recovery of “common sense.” They, too, treated modern philosophy, if not modern thought more generally, as strangely and obstinately inverted. They, too, were performing, each in a distinctive way, the treacherous feat of the *salto mortale*.

1. Convergences

Of course, his collegial relationship with Polanyi brought Poteat more than moral support in his analysis of the failures of philosophy. In conceiving a corrective alternative, the two were deeply attuned, so attuned that I do not think we can identify distinctively Polanyian elements in Poteat’s thought. At best, we can only point to places where Poteat chose to develop his own position in Polanyian language and structures. Of the many that might be mentioned here, I will confine myself to three.

1.1 Faith that grounds knowledge and action

Poteat, for all his hostility to modern philosophical assumptions, possessed philosophical acuity of a caliber that I have rarely encountered since. In both his criticism and his constructive work, he therefore expected of himself a logic that was superior to what he rejected. No fuzzy, second-rate arguments would do. Polanyi’s distinctive analysis of the actual operations of the working scientist opened for Poteat a clear, precise, and philosophically persuasive account of the fiduciary character of all acts of knowing. Polanyi’s framing of the “logic of affirmation” and his theory of the *from-to* structure of all learning and knowing provided a way to frame the attack on narrow conceptions of rationality without having to fall back into the swamp of intuitions, sensibility, feelings and sensations, and innate certainties (a swamp that Jacobi and others since have seldom found the language to escape). Now, to be sure, when Poteat first read *Personal Knowledge* in manuscript, he already had in place his knowledge of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and H. Richard Niebuhr. He had been tussling with the pervasiveness of faith and the limits of reason all along, but, to take just one example from these authors, the contrast between reason and the reasons of the heart, while it brings the cognitive and the conative into some sort of connection, leaves them sundered despite the word play. Polanyi, in contrast, traced the operations of faith, reliance, and commitment within the most putatively objective and rational of human enterprises. Without any deliberate fanfare, he simply filled in one of the various great ditches (some) philosophers had been struggling for several centuries to get across.

Perhaps even more importantly, Polanyi provided a structure that *justified* holding “unproven beliefs,” a structure that installed the indemonstrable as the unavoidable starting point of demonstration. He did this without appealing to any supernatural or mystical ground and without supposing any problematic intuitions or special organs of knowledge. At the same time that Polanyi banished methodological doubt, he removed the philosophical shame associated with reliance on the doubt-able. He thus made space for Poteat to write those

last two paragraphs of “Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology, and Action”:

Such fiduciary grounding cannot be explicitly prescribed; nor is there any sure protection against its eventual erosion.

After three centuries of a quest for, if not an assurance of, certainty we must contritely confess that we in the Western world have lived by nothing more substantial than hope, recognizing nevertheless that hope has always been rewarded by unexpected knowledge and that speech, made bold by hope, has always disclosed to us more than we could explicitly anticipate and than we can ever fully say. “What the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”⁴

1.2 *Heuristic passion*

Jacobi’s attack on eighteenth-century construals of rationality that reduced reason to explanation, together with the inadequacy of Jacobi’s own repeated efforts to formulate a persuasive alternative account, remind us, should we need any reminding, of just how tightly and invisibly we are all bound to the construal of knowledge as repeatable or at least traceable explanatory mastery. Polanyi’s reconstruction of knowing, accomplished by treating it as an action motivated by heuristic passion, provided Poteat with a means of conceptualizing (a means more philosophically convincing than the psychological theories offered by figures like Piaget) his own way of leaping over “rock and abyss” to land “firmly and in good health with both feet on the other side.”⁵ Discovery, the revelatory unfolding of the only now known, replaces the tracing and projecting of causal chains as the very soul of the active, groping, achieving enterprise of reasoning.

The notion of “intellectual passions” generally allowed Poteat, in one oxymoronic stroke, to override troublesome received dichotomies. I remember his holding out to me this idea of intellectual passion as the thread by which I might find my way from my background in literary studies into the world of philosophical and theological theory for which I was so manifestly ill prepared. Among the intellectual passions, heuristic passion, in Polanyi’s sense of “truth-bearing passion,”⁶ was especially important to him because of its power not only to account for feats of discovery but also to capture (without any self-sabotaging attempt to explain) creativity and originality—novelty in the life of the mind and in our social “world.”

It seems to me (though I admit that I have no firmer evidence to offer in support of this suggestion than my own limited sense of who he was) that it also gave him a name for his own driving, striving, searching, restless journey. It enabled him to claim his inability to find a place of peace as a virtue rather than a reason for despair. He adverted many times to what he called the witnessing presence of the philosophers whose lives and daily practices were, in his judgment, totally dissonant with the theories that they proffered. In contrast, he not only taught about but also witnessed to the vital reality of heuristic passion.

Moreover, it seems to me in retrospect that heuristic passion was what he wanted more than anything else from his graduate students. (I regret to say that at the time, clueless as I was, I did not really understand that.) That desire was, I would suggest, what made him a liberating and inspiring teacher. To seek to cultivate genuine heuristic passion in one’s students is a remarkable undertaking, requiring almost unfathomable trust: trust that the student has enough of a foundation to *reach* for true insight; trust that the student will *lay hold* of an insight that is not hopelessly redundant and banal; and trust that even if the insight is redundant or banal,

the simple *endeavor* of working it out in risk and responsibility will justify the venture.

1.3 *The evacuation of the agent*

Poteat complained frequently and colorfully about the philosophical fantasy of the “deracinate” knower, plucked up out of body and history, and divested of concrete particularity in order to reason impersonally and therefore reliably. Yet his more serious and abiding concern focused on the tendency of philosophical accounts to empty knowing, evaluation, and decision of any vestiges of agency at all. Fallacious as it might be to pretend to uproot the knower from her or his historical context, it is even worse to leave “thought” or “judgment” suspended in air to drift unanchored among impersonal and disowned “systems” that are scrutinized abstractly for their logic, their coherence, their truth—all without any reference to the agents who make the claims, uphold their truth, and act in the social space that they create. Here Polanyi’s often almost inarticulate references to that irreducible, always operational “centre of action,” “autonomous centre of decision,” and “primordial centre of individuality”⁷ converge with Poteat’s explorations of the mysterious and elusive character of the “I.” Poteat’s publication record makes it clear that his interest in and development of the theme of agency was well underway by the time he encountered Polanyi’s work, but Polanyi’s theory of emergence, which grounds the mind and all its operations (from the most rudimentary perception up through the most elaborate abstract conceptualizations) in the intricacies of bodily probing of world, sufficed to open for Poteat the possibility of recasting the reflexive, reflective “I” as the composite, thoroughly temporal mindbody that dominates Poteat’s late books. This attempt to give some sort of philosophical account of the systematically elusive and unsayable ground and meaning of agency and therefore freedom constitutes Poteat’s most distinctive and most significant contribution.

Indeed, there is reason to think that on this point Poteat may have attributed to Polanyi’s work more than Polanyi himself put into it. The criticism of *Meaning* put forward by Ron Hall and Bruce Haddox provides a case for reflection. They object that in his last, co-authored book Polanyi seems to move backward from important ground that he had staked out in *Personal Knowledge*. *Meaning* treats science and art as quite different, whereas *Personal Knowledge*, as they read it, makes “an innovative claim that science and art were grounded in the same structure of inquiry, the key feature of which was the centrality of the imaginative, creative person.”⁸ Hall argues, against the grain of the arguments in *Meaning*, that just as the scientist and the artist *both* “disappear” behind their work, the works of both science and art, *mutatis mutandis*, can only properly be accounted for by reference to the agency and ownership of the scientist or the artist.⁹ Haddox is even more explicit about the evacuation of agency he finds in *Meaning*:

The presence of persons as indicators in our first person language shows explicitly what Polanyi has always maintained is the fiduciary grounding of all claims. What this means is that all “framed” indications cannot be analyzed adequately *in themselves*, as Polanyi seems to be doing in *Meaning*, but must be cast within the logic of personal action. “Framed” science is a personal achievement of an abstract nature which is used by someone to indicate something about an aspect of reality.

....

The point here is that indication [the “integration” offered by the scientist or the artist in order to “indicate something about the world”] is an act by someone, not a logical characteristic of a particular class of propositions. . . . Like science, art is created by the imagination through abstraction and is what it is by virtue of how it is used in personal action. Polanyi argues this in *Personal Knowledge*. He seems to forget it in *Meaning*.¹⁰

I entirely agree with the critique of *Meaning* advanced by Hall and Haddox. But I wonder whether our sense of the regressive character of *Meaning* arises because Polanyi really did “forget” what he had achieved in his earlier work or whether Poteat taught the three of us to “hear” in Polanyi’s earlier work a more developed philosophical account of “the grounds of human action,” the “logical priority” of “first-person indication,” and “the self-involving nature of all actions”¹¹ than Polanyi ever put there.¹²

Conversely, though, I think it is also appropriate to wonder whether Poteat may, in his later work, have excessively diminished the social dimension of agency that Polanyi carefully preserved. It sometimes seems as if Poteat gave way to that seductive “turn to the self” that he had attacked as it manifested itself in critical philosophy—not, to be sure, in giving in to subjective idealism, but in “forgetting” the social nature of “world.” Consider two claims, one early and one late, from his writing. In “Faith and Existence,” an essay which is deeply consonant with the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and which appeared in *The Hibbert Journal* in 1953–1954, Poteat richly explores the proposition that “*a man’s identity is given by that which he ultimately loves and trusts, for it is this that imparts unity to all his purposes, volitions, and acts by defining his existence, as a whole; that as he is faithless to this he insomuch loses his identity. . .*”¹³ Roughly thirty-five years later, in *A Philosophical Daybook*, we find what seems to me to be a quite radically different understanding of the unity that constitutes personhood: “My mindbody is the absolutely radical and prior—at the root of and antecedent to absolutely everything (!)—*here and now: the primordial place; whence all times and spaces are pretended; that every time and space retrotends. There being this place is not the condition of my mindbodily integrity; it is this integrity.*”¹⁴

2. Persuasion, Ambivalence, and Influence

As nearly every commentator on Jacobi takes pains to point out (and as Jacobi himself felt compelled to insist), the *salto mortale* is not a blind, feet-first leap into the abyss (or ditch). It is a risky attempt to right oneself by one’s own daring powers. It is a treacherous maneuver, and performed on a tightrope, it can be fatal. It is one thing to criticize the way philosophy (or theology) is being done. It is quite another to propel oneself from the same formative grounding forward or backward through the air to land at some distance on one’s feet. Although Jacobi’s contribution seems to be attracting new interest, the general judgment still seems to be that, despite his importance as a critic and polemicist, the philosophical alternative he developed (insofar as it can be articulated clearly enough to be fairly evaluated) is neither particularly helpful nor successful. And Poteat? In the end, must the same be said of him?

I confess that I find the books that he wrote at the end of his career disappointing. Jacobi’s constructive project shipwrecked because he was never able to make clear how he thought *reason* ought to be understood, if it was not to be understood as the philosophers of his day (and most philosophers since, for that matter) have understood it. In contrast to the extraordinary lucidity of his critiques of Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, and Lessing, Jacobi’s own philosophical contribution thus remains oddly out of focus. My disappointment in Poteat’s final summings up is not that the fundamental insight remains unclear. In my judgment, the final books do a quite extraordinary job of consolidating the project that he began in the 1950s with “Birth, Suicide, and the Doctrine of Creation” (1959), “‘I Will Die’: An Analysis” (1959), and “God and the ‘Private-I’” (1960). My disappointment arises because I do not think the final books succeed in establishing why the “primacy of the person” really matters or what is gained by anchoring all knowing in mindbodily immediacy, tonality, retrotension, and protension. He fails to show the use. He fails to *show* that or how this will get us “out of the fly bottle.” This would be, from Polanyi’s point of view, a failure of *persuasive passion*.

Polanyi has quite a lot to say, in his chapter on the intellectual passions, about persuasive passion, a passion awakened by our hunger for response. While universal intent always requires that a knower seek to bring others to share her or his convictions, the most vivid examples of (and challenges for) persuasive passion arise when the discoverer is driven to adopt a new framework of interpretation. Persuasive passion, like heuristic passion, involves the crossing of a gap, but the gap is different: “To the extent to which a discoverer has committed himself to a new vision of reality, he has separated himself from others who still think on the old lines.”¹⁵ Formal argument and demonstration will not succeed when one is calling others to adopt “a new way of reasoning.” In such cases, supplemental strategies are required, and Polanyi names two: (1) The opponent’s way of arguing must be totally discredited, and the opponent must “be made to appear as thoroughly deluded,” which, Polanyi grants, “will easily come to imply that he [is] a fool, a crank or a fraud.”¹⁶ Thus, he adds, “In a clash of intellectual passions each side must inevitably attack the opponent’s person.”¹⁷ (2) But Polanyi also notes that “proponents of a new system can convince their audience only by first winning their intellectual sympathy for a doctrine they have not yet grasped.”¹⁸ Polanyi himself does not comment on the startling dissonance between the two. The second is far easier to achieve with one’s students than with one’s philosophical peers, so perhaps it is not surprising that Poteat’s intellectual life, particularly after Polanyi’s death, seemed to find its center among his doctoral students. To employ the first strategy almost always forecloses the second. Moreover, the first, as a strategy of *persuasion*, supposes that a vigorous conversation is in progress in which advocates of competing systems actively contend in the effort to show the bearing of their claims upon the real. Ironically, as Poteat’s thought matured, he seems not to have sought that and may even have actively refused it. Certainly Poteat’s choice of meditative reflection removed him from the ‘agora’ in which “heuristic passion will . . . turn (and have to turn) into *persuasive* passion.”¹⁹

But perhaps this is unfair. Given the dilemma of the thinker whose *salto mortale* has made him unable to speak any longer in the language of his peers, perhaps it was and is up to those of us who were students of Poteat to do the work of showing the use. Perhaps, in dozens of disparate ways, we actually have. But it is at least possible that, infected with Poteat’s ambivalence toward philosophy, we (with the possible exception of Ron Hall) have not done this work in a telling way, that is, in a way that would lodge Poteat’s contribution in the structure of late modern American philosophy. That his ambivalence toward philosophy was profound is beyond doubt. What we are left with in those last books, much more strikingly than in his earlier work, is a philosopher rejecting philosophy so completely that he seems to have no task left apart from the reiteration of the rejection. A philosopher rejecting philosophy—without being quite willing to abandon it and go back to playing bridge or cut his boat free and come ashore in the world of art criticism or philosophical theology.

Yet, even as I write all this I am increasingly aware that, as the comparison with Jacobi suggests, Poteat actually takes his place in a long and distinctive philosophical tradition. Differences abound, but there are some remarkable similarities between Jacobi’s critique of philosophical rationalism in the late eighteenth century, the appeals to sensibility characteristic of German romanticism, William James’s critique of monological reductionism in the early twentieth century,²⁰ and the “therapeutic” analyses of Poteat, Polanyi, and Wittgenstein in the middle to late twentieth century—not to speak of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and their heirs.

So perhaps the more pertinent question is actually this: Why have Jacobi and all his fellow travelers down through these two hundred years of philosophical argument failed to set philosophy back on its feet? Is it because they as much as their adversaries are trapped inside the fly bottle? But what would the way out look like if none of these can be said to have found it? Is it because those who succeed in the *salto mortale* become, by their very success, incomprehensible, or simply cease to philosophize in any recognizable sense? Or is it

because the dominant tradition, still broadly funded by the continuing success of the sciences, remains so powerful (despite its contradictions, hypertrophies, and dissociations) that even penetrating criticism will continue to amount only to a high, resistant descant reminding us that the harmonies and arguments among the dominant choral voices are not, after all, the entire story?

Endnotes

¹Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *David Hume on Faith or Idealism and Realism: A Dialogue*, collected in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill,"* trans. with introduction, notes, and bibliography by George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 276.

²Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*, in *Main Philosophical Writings*, 189. The advice is metaphorically imperfect because the actual acrobatic *salto mortale*, performed on the high wire, is an air-borne, no-hands somersault beginning from a standing jump; thus, the performer begins and ends standing upright. Lessing famously declined to attempt the maneuver on the grounds that it required "a leap that I can no longer ask of my old legs and heavy head" (*Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*, 195).

³William H. Poteat, "George Steiner: The Extra-Territorial Critic," in *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays by William H. Poteat*, ed. with an introduction by James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 266. The essay was originally published in *Soundings* 45.4 (1972):421-37.

⁴William H. Poteat, "Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology and Action: Some Polanyian Meditations," in *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, ed. with an introduction by Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, for the Lilly Endowment Research Program in Christianity and Politics, 1968), 231. The closing quotation is from "Little Gidding," the last of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

⁵The imagery is once again Jacobi's, from a letter written to Neeb May 30, 1817. I have not seen the text of this letter, but it is quoted in: Rolf Ahlers, review of *Werke*, by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, ed. Klaus Hammacher and Walter Jaeschke, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43.4 (2005): 492.

⁶Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958, 1962), 143.

⁷Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 364, 403, 377.

⁸Ronald L. Hall, "Michael Polanyi on Art and Religion: Some Critical Reflections on *Meaning*," *Zygon* 17.1:14.

⁹Hall, "Michael Polanyi on Art and Religion," 15-16.

¹⁰Bruce Haddox, "Questioning Polanyi's *Meaning*: A Response to Ronald Hall," *Zygon* 17.1:20-21.

¹¹Haddox, "Questioning," 23, 23, 24.

¹²Poteat himself acknowledges in several places that he draws implications from Polanyi's work that were not "wittingly" written in by Polanyi. See, in particular, William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a*

Post-Critical Logic (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985), 192.

¹³William H. Poteat, *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture*, ed. and with an introduction by James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 120–21, italics in original.

¹⁴William H. Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1990), entry for March 17, 1988.

¹⁵Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 150.

¹⁶Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 151.

¹⁷Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 152.

¹⁸Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 151.

¹⁹Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 159.

²⁰For James's own invocation of the *salto mortale*, see: Ronald B. Levinson, "A Note on One of James's Favorite Metaphors," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 8.2 (1947): 237–39.

Electronic Discussion List

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group that explores implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can join. To join yourself, go to the following address: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join. If you have difficulty, send an e-mail to Doug Masini (masini@etsu.edu) and someone will see that you are added to the list.