

Making Tacit Knowing Explicit: William H. Poteat's Adaptation of Polanyi's Post-Critical Method

Kieran Cashell

ABSTRACT Key Words: William H. Poteat, Michael Polanyi, Post-Cartesian epistemology, post-critical logic, apprenticeship, tacit/explicit knowing, indwelling, subsidiary/focal, mind/body, mindbodily, being in the world, reflexive phenomenology, picture, *Gestalt*, figure, ground.

William H. Poteat's critique of Cartesianism is an amplification of the philosophical work of Michael Polanyi. Poteat applies Polanyian methods to articulate an alternative to the metaphysical dualism that, he argues, still dominates Western reflective thought at a tacit level. His argument is that the novel logic of Polanyi's Personal Knowledge puts the presuppositions of the modern philosophical tradition in question. In the elaboration of this focal argument, Poteat's subsidiary acceptance of Polanyi's anterior work is total. Nevertheless it remains important to disambiguate the thought of the two philosophers. In this essay, I argue that Poteat's reliance on Polanyi as means of elaborating his own original philosophical position is perhaps what is most distinctive of this relationship. For Poteat relies on Polanyian grounds ontologically to the extent that, once assimilated, these supporting grounds are finally cancelled. I argue that even if it is ultimately impossible to locate the precise point where Polanyi ends and Poteat begins, it remains necessary to attempt a clean separation. For only in this way can Poteat's unique contribution to philosophy be focally appreciated.

“We bear this access to Being about with us as the condition of there being a world.”

William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, p. 14.

“... every thoughtful submission to authority is qualified by some, however slight, opposition to it.”

Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 164.

“To understand sums in elementary school the children would have to be important philosophers. Failing that, they need practice.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 703.

William Poteat's critique of post-Cartesian dualism is presented as an amplification of the philosophical work of Michael Polanyi. In *Polanyian Meditations*, the concept of tacit knowing is applied as a method to initiate and develop an alternative to the metaphysical dualism that, according to Poteat, still dominates Western models of theoretical reflection.¹ His argument is that the innovative logic suggested by Polanyi's idiosyncratic interpretation of key concepts in *Personal Knowledge*² (such as: “presupposition,” “premise” and, especially, “assumption”) rewards careful and serious philosophic attention.³ In fact, this inadvertently avant-garde use of logical concepts, according to Poteat, has the radical potential to put the basic presuppositions of the entire modern philosophical tradition in question. Even the very hypothesis of tacit knowing itself, namely, that there is an inexplicit dimension of pre-reflective belief that determines explicit acts of reflective knowledge, and hence cannot be clarified *prior* to inquiry, suggests, for Poteat, nothing less than a dramatic epistemological transvaluation with revolutionary consequences for how our situation in the world is understood. A key hypothesis of *Polanyian Mediations* is that any theory of knowledge (epistemology) necessarily implies a theory of being (ontology). More accurately: my modes of knowing reduplicate my modes of being in the world.⁴ To

one apprenticed to the tradition and informed by its conceptual values, ‘to find a new way to think about my situation in the world,’ Poteat says elsewhere, ‘is the ultimate tour de force’.⁵

Polanyi’s radical position is, according to Poteat, relatively easy to state: that knowledge is *knowing*, ‘merely a special class of human activity subsumed under the larger class, viz., the complex repertoire of ways of humanly being in the world’.⁶ In Poteat’s terms the truth of this unassuming claim is established when one appreciates that it is *revelatory of being*; it is ‘pregnant with the possibility of disclosing hitherto undiscovered aspects of *reality*’ (and this is Poteat’s Polanyian definition of truth) a reality that we nevertheless inhabit as it inhabits us but yet may ultimately remain opaque to theoretical reflection if the norms that govern it are set by the post-Cartesian epistemological paradigm.⁷ For it is only relative to the distinctive epistemic conventions of this paradigm (and I mean principally the mutual autonomy of subject and object) that “reality” is identified as that which is problematically independent of, and therefore indifferent to, human existence. According to the basic demands of this orthodoxy, which prioritises conceptual clarity and overvalues the inquiry motivated by scepticism, the cognitive ego is (imagined to be) radically detached from the context and provenance of all *actual achievements* of knowledge. Yet, as Poteat reminds us, the ascendant autonomy of the transcendental subject comes at the devastating price of a profound, despairing alienation from nature.

This “bifurcation of nature” . . . meant that man as knower comes increasingly to be conceived as alien to, because estranged by abstraction from, and therefore quite incommensurable with, the material world that is the very object of his knowing.⁸

With the doctrines of Descartes is inaugurated what Poteat elsewhere terms our ‘long season of self-alienating madness’.⁹ Polanyi’s thesis proposes to preserve the dynamic activity of knowing in the theory of knowledge and thereby cauterise the bifurcation of nature by retrieving the epistemic agency and ontological context lost in the paradigmatic picture.

In the elaboration of this *focal* argument, Poteat’s *subsidiary* acceptance – his *belief* in the truth of Polanyi’s anterior work – is total. To those trained in the practice of critical exegesis, where the requirement to attribute ideas to a single agency seems imperative, it is not easy to accept the hybridisation of thought represented by Poteat’s open admissions of deference. We could say, employing the central inspirational motif of *Polanyian Meditations* that, as readers of Poteat, his acceptance of Polanyi as intellectually anterior is logically implied in our acceptance of Poteat’s work as derivative. Accordingly, Walter Mead’s claim to distinguish where Polanyi leaves off and Poteat takes off¹⁰ may appear perhaps too quick to disregard Poteat’s admission of thorough Polanyian assimilation: Polanyi has become, as acknowledged in the *Prologue to Polanyian Meditations*, part of the integral structure of Poteat’s tacit knowledge and therefore, according to this concept, this should be *assumed* to constitute the given logical ground of every subsequent hypothesis articulated. This is not to accuse Mead of being insensitive to the embedding of Polanyian thought in Poteat’s thinking. He is well aware of the complex indebtedness of Poteat’s thought to Polanyi. His paper ‘William Poteat’s Anthropology: “Mindbody in the World”’ remains an important and subtle effort to distinguish Poteat’s original contribution while acknowledging that his original thought *must still be* conceived as profoundly influenced by Polanyi. However, despite what I might appear to argue here, I think, as should become clear as I proceed through the argument of this paper, that Mead is absolutely correct to confront the difficulty of disambiguating the thought of the two philosophers. For what is most strikingly original about Poteat’s method – *paradoxically* – is the almost obsequious way in which he relies on Polanyi as means of ultimately articulating his own philosophical position. And yet it could be maintained with some justification that Poteat relies on subsidiary

Polanyian grounds only to the extent that, once assimilated, and in a movement corresponding to a dialectical *Aufhebung*, these supporting grounds can finally be successfully sublated: cancelled, they remain preserved in an embalmed state in the infrastructure of Poteat's focal itinerary. Thus, even if it may be ultimately impossible to locate the precise point where Polanyi 'leaves off' and Poteat 'takes off', it remains decisively necessary to attempt a clean separation. For only in this way can Poteat's original contribution to philosophical investigation be focally appreciated. Otherwise his radical writings are in danger of being misconstrued as mere commentary. And they are definitely not that.

Self-consciously and respectfully indebted to Polanyi, his presence in Poteat is ubiquitous; it informs everything at an infrastructural level. With 'humility and obedience'¹¹, the authorial presence in his own text is thereby reduced to a *medium* for the transmission of Polanyi's thought. Poteat's authorship is mediated Polanyi. It might be said that Polanyi is so profoundly ingrained and knitted into Poteat that his explication involves an unprecedented form of *introspection*. In order to think *out* of himself, he has had to look *into* himself. Yet this, *paradoxically*, places Polanyi, even if this very analysis derives from his proximal-distal distinction, at a strategic distance. Indeed the etymological origin of "mediation" is the later Latin *mediare*, which as Poteat, in a moment of unconscious self-revelation, observes, signifies "to cut in half".¹² So I guess my question is: is it possible to separate the halves of this mediation? Can we amputate Poteat from Polanyi? Where do we search for the seams?

Yet the peculiarity of this *aporetic* mediation – the conscious introjection of one thinker by another so that he is at once infinitely proximal and significantly distal – may be considerably clarified when that relationship is considered as an *apprenticeship*. And indeed, this is how Poteat himself describes it. The idea of apprenticeship is not without philosophical significance for Poteat's Polanyian project; for that which is involved in the initiation into a practice, namely: submission to the authority of the mentor until the practice is competently acquired, the time taken for the trade to be thoroughly assimilated by the apprentice, the synthesis of knowing and doing implied in training, and the final ownership of the practice taken by the journeyman as evinced in a secure and confident style of novel application – are all of a piece with the epistemological perspective developed in *Personal Knowledge*.

Polanyi's account of tacit knowing often refers to the model of apprenticeship; he writes: 'the intimations followed by the learner are based primarily in his confidence in others; and this is an acceptance of authority'.¹³ In the *Tacit Dimension*, he characterises scientific knowledge, its acquisition and accreditation, as apprenticeship to a practice; for it is only when considered in terms of initial acquiescence to authority, that Polanyi can argue that the generational relay of knowledge is 'predominantly tacit'.¹⁴ In the individual case, this occurs by virtue of the process Polanyi calls 'indwelling', namely, the complete acquiescence to the practice until it becomes "second nature". 'In order to share this indwelling, the pupil must presume that a teaching that appears meaningless to start with has in fact a meaning which can be discovered by hitting on the same indwelling as the teacher is practicing'.¹⁵ That is to say, by focally appreciating the subsidiary *form* of the practice more than its content (how the professor behaves in the work context, how she embodies her fundamental beliefs, epitomises "best practice") the belief system that governs the logic of the practice is finally introjected as an internal dimension of the apprentice's subsequent epistemological attitude. Unless this process takes place, the practice is not completely assimilated and the approach to problem-solving cannot be innovative. This involves unconditional *belief* in the value-system of the institution epitomised by the mentor. 'Such an effort is based on accepting the teacher's authority'.¹⁶ The protégé is successfully inducted into the fiduciary structure of the institution only when the values and methods of this institution have been successfully introjected (that is,

unconsciously assimilated) and a *way of doing* becomes a *form of life*, the proximal ground of departure for every subsequent distal application of knowledge. Every creative act based on its fiduciary structure is informed by it and simultaneously reinforces the axiology of the institution. The process is concluded when the journeyman, having assumed ownership of the belief system that has taken up residency in her, possesses the potential to undertake self-directed inquiry (and ultimately make an individual contribution to the field) – all without immediate awareness of the operative tacit dimension orchestrating her conscious research-questions.

Because it suggests that knowing is *active* – and, primarily, a *belief-based* activity – the apprenticeship model is crucial to understanding the epistemological picture elaborated by the journeyman Polanyian philosopher Poteat. What is that picture? Poteat argues that Polanyi’s innovative use of logical concepts, although largely involuntary, implies the *shocking* truth that ‘our only grounds for accepting [the grounds of the premises of formal logic] is the fact that we do accept them and cannot imagine *not* doing so’.¹⁷

Because they are internalised through apprenticeship to a practice, such grounds have become so much an intrinsic part of our being, that we can be made conscious of them, if at all, only after the fact of having made some discovery based on them. When inquiry is complete, having derived some conclusion from a logical assumption, and having represented this in a defensible, logically sound pattern of argument, we may then inquire: what constituted the axiomatic assumption of this *practice* itself and where are *its* grounds? What beliefs, that is to say, ground the motivation for and indeed the *structure* of inquiry itself? Certain assumptions constitute the tacit conditions of possibility of inquiry itself, indeed, of all cognitive activity and as apprentices to a ‘convivium’ of practitioners, we come to rely implicitly on these grounds – they are implied in all subsequent practice.¹⁸ These grounds are made up of pre-reflective believings that inform our cognitive attitude and comportment at an infrastructural level and finally constitute the ‘logical / ontological *grounds* of our coming to achieve our presently *explicit* beliefs’.¹⁹ Knowledge, despite appearances, is never *sui generis*.

It is necessary to indicate that *ground* as used by Poteat should be understood in the *Gestaltist* sense as that *background* according to which all explicit acts of knowing are the intentional figures.²⁰ This explains why the background infrastructure of beliefs cannot be lucidly or explicitly dwelt upon *as such*: to use Polanyi’s terms, it cannot be focally apprehended simply because it is *dwelt within: at once* that subsidiary matrix that makes possible all focal apprehension and the *sine qua non* from which every cognitive performance is initiated. ‘In every act of speech’, Poteat observes, ‘I attend from this richly implicative grid of surplus meanings in my native language as ground to what I am actually bodying forth as figure’.²¹

Therefore because tacit, that is to say, deeply introjected, the epistemological grounds of inquiry are radically fiduciary – they cannot be explicitly *known* prior to inquiry: they are unconscious (if in the ordinary rather than Freudian sense). Tacit knowing, for both Polanyi and Poteat, remains, by definition, therefore, *immune to doubt*. And, for Poteat at least, it goes all the way down to the ontological ground of all belief and epistemic activity.

The alternative epistemological and ontological ground unto which I have been trying to draw you is one upon which our feats of reflection and intellection – the exercise of our so-called higher powers – are seen to be rooted in and derivative of even our most primitive forms of sentience, motility and orientation: our “minds” are seen to be inextricably implicated with our “bodies”.²²

According to the orthodox epistemological narrative, as we have considered, knowledge tends to be divorced from the actual activity of *knowing*. If emphasis falls on the *latter* however, Poteat argues, this will return us *ultimately* to its intentional genesis in the knowing *living* body of the knower. Situating the act of knowing in the body of the knower, according to Poteat, compels us to consider the agent of knowledge as a complex hybrid of cognitive and somatic aspects. It is a reductive falsification of the facts to continue to consider cognitive activity as contained in the mind, or claimed exclusively by consciousness, or sited in the Cartesian cogito. Rather, as a motor skill is integrated with the comprehensive logic of the somatic economy, knowledge is *incarnate* – that is, it should be considered to inform our physical being; knowledge is held *viscerally*, ‘by the very act of “taking up” existence in the world’. We, in other words, *embody* our knowing.²³

According to the unprecedented epistemological view intimated by Polanyi and amplified by Poteat, it is actually possible to say that “muscles make assumptions”.²⁴ (See, for instance, Poteat’s close analyses of striking a tennis ball in *PM*.) ‘When therefore I rely on my bodily being in the world as the *conditio sine qua non* of my action, *it* is the assumption in which the act is grounded’.²⁵

I would like to suggest that Poteat *embodies* his epistemological apprenticeship to Polanyi and that *Polanyian Meditations* is a document, a written report of this embodiment expressed from within its ingrained structure. Indeed, in a later work, Poteat describes the process of coming to know, again implicitly following Polanyi’s model of apprenticeship, through the extraordinary claim that all knowing is indwelling an “other”²⁶: ‘to indwell an other’ he explains ‘is in the important sense to *know* it; to have had this knowledge is to be able to *remember* it, to bear it along and recreate it in myself’.²⁷ His apprenticeship to Polanyi is exactly of the order of this *indwelling* an other in the important sense described here. Once he has thoroughly assimilated Polanyi, and thereby realised *in himself* that the existential infrastructure of all knowledge and belief must be assumed to subsist behind all our acts, the aim of Poteat’s project will be to recollect this forgotten knowledge in order to retrieve the ultimate ground – and get his readers to attend to it despite its resistance to focal apprehension. Indeed, this resistance is due in large measure, Poteat claims, to the ‘amnesia’ of post-Cartesian metaphysical dualism which, in depicting the self as a ‘theatre of solitude’, abstracts the object of knowledge from the knower, disremembers the ‘concrete density’ of the lifeworld and, most paradigmatically (and damagingly), divorces the body from the mind.²⁸ But because, as we have seen, Polanyi’s radical theory of tacit knowing puts the dualism of mind and body into question, Poteat insists on referring to the final irreducible ontological background implied by this epistemological view by suturing the Cartesian divorcees into a hybrid: whence the ‘mindbody’ that has given critics of Poteat much grief: Thus: ‘My mindbodily being in the world, itself finally opaque to reflection, is my bedrock assumption’.²⁹

Irreducibly both body and mind, only mind because already body and only body because mind, ‘We discover at bottom they are not two but one’.³⁰ In a very late text, possibly his last, an unpublished essay on Cézanne, Poteat delivers perhaps the clearest expression of the consequences of his Polanyian indwelling and its associated project of recollection. According to this alternative epistemology, the ‘dualism of mind and body’ he writes ‘has been seen not to be ontologically radical, but derivative; so too with the distinction between subject and object – a distinction that [may be] indispensable for our second-order discourse ... but not ontological bedrock’.³¹ He concludes:

From the standpoint of our mindbodies, the subject and object of our second-order, essentially static conceit of our relation to the world are seen to be but two different moments of a single reality. ... At no point in this lively dialectic is there any place for a subject with an opposing

object.³²

The *mindbody* is that which is responsible for *assuming* the pre-reflective tacit beliefs that determine all subsequent acts of cognitive behaviour. Although these may never be made explicit, the mindbody itself *expressly* embodies all our infrastructural beliefs and epistemic attitudes, and, although the tacit dimension cannot be articulated in propositional language, and although the mindbody therefore refuses to be theoretically reflected, is ‘systematically elusive’,³³ nevertheless (and here Poteat draws on Wittgenstein’s saying / showing distinction), it ‘shows itself’.³⁴

Poteat is aware that such notions as holding inexplicit beliefs, possessing tacit knowledge we are unaware of yet pre-reflectively rely on, or, indeed, hypotheses about a locus of reflection that itself resists being reflected will appear nothing short of scandalous to apprentices to a paradigm that identifies objectivity with abstraction and philosophical probity with disinterested detachment. Yet all ‘scandal disappears if we remember that all of our most fundamental believings and evaluings are (logically) dependent upon their mute embodiment in our intentional mindbodies in their convivial setting, [yet remain] beyond explicitation’.³⁵ One of the most significant (and most disturbing for the post-Cartesian mind-set) consequences of this is, of course, that all our most fundamental beliefs and values, held within the fertile, *radically given* ground of our existential itinerary, remain immune to doubt and are therefore, to the extent that they are implicitly relied on yet only tacitly known, *certain* in a way more profound than the Cartesian sense. This is the real scandal.

Characterised according to the model of apprenticeship suggested here, what Poteat acquires from Polanyi may in fact ultimately be impossible to measure. But one thing he does get from him is the confidence to express and develop his own philosophical intuitions into a full-blown post-critical philosophical project. This project has two aspects.

On the one hand, Poteat, totally accepting Polanyi’s radical theory of knowing, seeks to expose the subsidiary commitments that refer our knowledge to a fundamental ontological ground. Thus Poteat claims to use Polyanian logic as a critical method to elaborate and amplify what he believes still remains latent in *PK*, namely, that the background of all my knowing, doing, speaking, and the reflective inquiries that derive from these primary activities, is my pre-linguistic being in the world: the irreducible “mindbody” repeatedly invoked in *PM*. This is what is *a priori* accepted (intuitively given) in all my deliberative inquiry however alienated it may appear to be from that ‘ambient’ and ‘lively’ locus.³⁶ The *mindbody* is the physical being that, in its quotidian context, temporally extensive and bio-historical, in its presence, which at once ‘retrotends’ my past being (as memory) and ‘pretends’ my future (as anticipation), is sentient and intentional, Poteat establishes as the matrix ‘of all meaning and meaning-discernment’.³⁷ It is the ultimate ground, ‘the nonexistence of which’ he says ‘is inconceivable’.³⁸

But this proposition is, Poteat exclaims, the most prosaic datum possible! And yet, precisely for this reason, it simultaneously represents the most radical challenge for those apprenticed to the philosophical tradition. It is also unfortunately the most difficult for sympathisers to defend.

“Yes, of *course*. These facts are obvious; *everyone* knows them – the most ordinary things in the world”; and because they are ordinary – in other words, known to us simply because they are imbedded in our routine practice, rather than as the outcome of systematic reflection – we conclude that they could not possibly have any serious philosophic import, inasmuch

as, since Descartes, only that knowledge is taken to be serious that is the issue of a skepticism raising us, so it is imagined, above our history and practice.³⁹

And this brings us conveniently to the second aspect of Poteat's project. It is, of course, needless to say, intimately related to the first aspect ... as a duck to a rabbit. This is the adaptation of the Polanyian 'picture' of apprenticeship to a practice, where the inquirer is pictured as 'engaged in the activity of inquiry, governed ... by a way of doing, anterior to the formalisation of explicit rules'⁴⁰ into a post-critical method to expose the tacit assent to a discredited Cartesian *modus operandi* he believes to be endemic to modern Western culture. And this is also where Poteat, having taken ownership of the belief system that has taken up residency in him, begins to apply his interiorised Polanyian motifs in a creative and individual way to a unique problem. This is, in other words, where his project really comes into its own.

It is not insignificant that the last three meditations of *PM* do not mention Polanyi or refer to his writings. This is because this marks the point where the umbilical cord is severed and the two halves can be separated: Poteat will now concentrate on developing his own post-critical project of exposing the residual Cartesian metaphysical dualism from its sublimated state in the cultural imagination of Western modernity. And now, because he believes this commitment to the critical heritage of Descartes has been thoroughly assimilated, it has actually become *uncritical* – a fundamental part of our common sense repertoire. The Western *zeitgeist* is profoundly, yet unconsciously conditioned, infected, by what he calls an 'ur-Cartesianism'⁴¹ which is reinforced by alphanumeric literacy and the official supremacy of mathematical ideals of formal rationality as well as the ascendancy of the visual models of conceptual theorisation. Indeed, using the post-critical method, this crypto-Cartesianism can be exposed as most damaging, most insidiously influential, paradoxically, in instances where it is explicitly criticised yet still unconsciously affirmed.

For Cartesianism, as characterised in *PM*, is not a systematic theory rigorously explicated by its exponents. Rather it is a dominant but deeply sublimated metaphysical grammar composed of a vocabulary of paradigmatic images and values, motifs and metaphors that operate at a subterranean level in the imagination; and this grammar informs all our implicit beliefs about the nature of reality and our relationship to it, determining even the motivation to think or inquire in the first place. We are all, Poteat argues, apprentices to the institution of Cartesian dualism. Indeed, its ubiquitous presence is so pervasive, Poteat argues, that the very efforts to overcome its paralysing binary grammar often anchor us even more inescapably to it. Thus according to Poteat's analysis, this entrenched, fiduciary commitment to the Cartesian metaphysical picture is the very background condition that necessarily remains uncritically assumed and is therefore ironically the very thing that remains immune to the methodological doubt canvassed by Descartes.

An ecumenical doubt, infused with an intellectual energy sufficient to affect a whole worldwide culture, only became possible when a Descartes, during a few hours, took himself to be a world-transcending – even a self-transcending – god before whom "everything" could be arrayed, as if in a gnostic instant, to present its credentials to a detached and non-committal gaze.⁴²

The target of Poteat's post-critical method is nothing other than this legacy of 'uncriticised Enlightenment criticism'.⁴³ In his hands, the Polanyian post-critical logic becomes a method, a project of de-sublimation which is closely related to the psychoanalytic technique. For, he explains, we 'are working against long-standing and powerful resistance' and 'the psychoanalytic analogy is apposite here'.⁴⁴ Indeed, he frequently uses the terms of pathology to describe our dysfunctional sublimated commitment to Cartesianism: it is, he says, 'a chronic

depression', a 'repetition compulsion',⁴⁵ or even a full-blown 'madness'.⁴⁶ With this realisation, a 'demand for sanity takes hold'⁴⁷ yet 'if we are to cut deeper into the sources and characteristic disorders of this culture, we will have to bring some of the motifs of this criticism to bear on itself'.⁴⁸ Criticism of this pathological critical heritage will therefore have to assume the form of 'nothing other than a precritical logic recovered after an excess of [uncriticised] criticism'.⁴⁹

But why is the Cartesian epistemological paralysis so resistant to every genuine therapeutic effort to eradicate it? It only has the indestructible, pernicious power it has because 'our subscription to it is ... tacit'⁵⁰: make it explicit through the post-critical method, Poteat suggests, and 'the ground we have surrendered, even though we never ceased to stand upon it, will be recovered; and with it our sanity'.⁵¹

Retrieving the ground and our mental health clearly requires two almost antithetical approaches: on the one hand, it requires a more disciplined and thoroughgoing critical comportment than the critical ethos of Enlightenment modernity has bequeathed to us. For this post-critical method must prepare itself to challenge the very norms of lucid objectivity by refusing to accept methodological doubt as the provenance of inquiry. On the other hand, it requires, at the same time, every effort to suspend our 'critical inheritance'.⁵² This involves the ingenuous acceptance of the intuitive ontological ground of all inquiry, belief, activity and knowing, that from which all the dualisms of the Cartesian picture derive, namely, my *mindbodily being in the world*. This is because:

In our acritical, off-duty moments what is obvious is taken at face-value and as worthy of no special notice. Only when a whole critical tradition has trained us to be on guard and has grossly impeached our sense of what is important in what is obvious do we have to struggle to recover our senses.⁵³

Drawing our post-critical attention to this 'systemically elusive' ultimate background, the [mindbodily] 'whence of all meaning and meaning-discernment'⁵⁴ is the only way to eradicate the Cartesian metaphysical dualism to which we are unconsciously apprenticed; for this irreducible ground is precisely the ontological matrix which is *suppressed* when the allegedly *radical* mind has been divorced by reflection from my bodily being, when the concept of the object stands opposed to the transcendental subject, and when the fantasy of the disembodied *ego cogito* has claimed a hegemonic perch from which all being is surveyed. And I feel at once god-like, yet desperately alienated. The remedy for our post-Cartesian psycho-pathology, according to Poteat, is to recover the quotidian mindbodily being in the world, the forgotten ground of all knowing and activity.

This necessary ground is precisely the Being to which all men have an absolutely indubitable access in the convivial sense of their own existence to which they are ... bonded, the non-existence of which is inconceivable.⁵⁵

But how, Poteat, can you know all this?

I am hard pressed to say. However this will in no way weaken my intuitive certainty.⁵⁶

Poteat's adaptation of Polanyi's post-critical philosophy now perhaps becomes clear against the background sketched here. He describes it as the supreme and repeated effort to avoid alienation from the existential actuality of his own mindbodily being in the world. He calls this effort 'reflexive phenomenology'⁵⁷ and it is characterised as follows: 'to allow myself to resonate with the actuality of my own existential mindbody in its act of reflecting upon reflection *from the inside*'.⁵⁸ It is this method that is applied to in those descriptive

vignettes of engagement in activities so crucial to Poteat's philosophical style: striking a ball with his tennis-racket, jogging for five miles with his dog, gazing at a painting in his study, listening to a landlady refuse to let her rooms and watching her gestures, lying on a rock by the Grand Canyon for six hours, the panic of a sudden attack of amnesia in a shopping mall.

Above all, however, the most important motifs in this *genre* are the detailed descriptions of the physical process of writing – of Poteat, our author, actually writing with pen on paper – that repeatedly interrupt the course of our reading. Drawing attention to the nib of his Cross pen at the beginning of *Recovering the Ground*, for instance, he attributes the subtleties of his thought to the extra-fine point of that nib. 'A delicate instrument for thinking' he says 'encourages delicate thought'.⁵⁹ The point of these impolite incursions that so rudely alarm the solitary reader, of course, is to induce us to awaken to our own mindbodily being in the world and thus shake us out of our Cartesian slumber by making us reflexively conscious of our somatic, proprioceptive, spatio-temporal engagement in the very activity of existing. 'The texts of my books' he continues are so 'designed to defeat their appropriation in order that, paradoxically, the reader will be forced to dwell in, reappropriate and come to value the logos of his or her own quotidian mindbodily life'.⁶⁰

If all this seems quite distant from Polanyi it is because the journeyman Poteat has struck out here on his own post-critical programme. In fact, at one point, he explicitly contrasts his reflexive methodology with Polanyi's post-critical philosophy, claiming his own as more radical than Polanyi's and reminding us perhaps of Polanyi's observation that 'every thoughtful submission to authority is qualified by some, however slight, opposition to it'.⁶¹ Yet, even here, Poteat immediately qualifies the claim by adding that this radical reflexive phenomenology is *tacitly* implied in the 'metaphorical intentionalities of *Personal Knowledge* throughout'.⁶² And yet somehow, again *even here*, this tacit implication raises an explicit head when Polanyi says:

We can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions – from within the whole system of [mindbodily] acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge.⁶³

Perhaps the point is that Poteat is never closer to Polanyi than when he appears furthest from him. But how could I establish that? I can't. *But I feel its truth.*

So how is one to do justice to this unique philosophical project? Certainly, as should be clear, the configuration of a formal paper, acceding respectfully to the lucid formula of argument and exposition, that ticks all the rhetorical boxes familiar to the academic tradition would misrepresent Poteat and, indeed, implicitly condemn his efforts: 'the paradigm of a good written-out argument surreptitiously takes on the values of a page of print' and thus effects 'a reduction of the lively reality of our actual [feats of knowing] to an abstraction'.⁶⁴ 'The literate imagination, because it is alienated by print from the concrete density of my mindbodily life' he insists, *in print*, 'moves me – leads us – toward an abstract picture of myself in the world'.⁶⁵ To do justice to Poteat, to bear witness to his lifework, which I *want to do* because it is important to me, cannot be to *teach* "Poteat" – if this means to tell students what his work is about, and if this means addressing that 'upon what "objects" it bears'.⁶⁶ No, I shall teach what I've always taught, but now with more confidence, rejuvenated from apprenticeship to a completely transformed post-critical epistemological enterprise that encourages the development of a unique and personal style of being in the world.

One may therefore claim expertise regarding Poteat's writings and yet fail to grasp the ultimate

significance of his work. This is because the objective of his teaching was not to transmit a determinate informational content accessible to cognitive assimilation. Rather, as Dale Cannon, a former student of Poteat observes, the significance of the latter's work actually resists being taught, it refuses, that is, to be translated into informational terms. Poteat's significance 'has to do with something that cannot straightforwardly be said and comprehended in modern intellectual terms at all.' Rather, Cannon concludes:

It has to do with undergoing a shift in sensibility, a radical shift: from attending to *what* ... 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.*⁶⁷

To do justice to Poteat's post-critical philosophic project in this live presentation I would have had to attempt to capture my *aporetic* struggles with Poteat's (and Polanyi's) ideas. Somehow, I would have to have endeavoured to create *new* ways to adequately represent these perplexities – to develop some form that would mime the process of composition, that would represent, ultimately, the practice of thinking itself – complete with its passions, existential absorptions, as well as its abortive starts, snares, distractions, hiatuses, the frustrations of never quite finding the right words. The 'fail again, fail better' scenarios: am I getting it right?; have I explained it adequately?; what the hell am I saying / doing here? How does one represent the long periods of near catatonic inactivity characteristic of 'doing philosophy'? What, indeed, of the thinking that emerges at the distal point of the pen-tip scratching its traces on the surface of the paper that Poteat has drawn our philosophic attention to? What also of the fingers' choreography across the keyboard that appears to outrun my very thoughts, I am talking about that tacit kinaesthetic skill for locating keys that I cannot adequately explain and would be hard pressed to say how and when I learned? But this pressure does not weaken my intuitive certainty.

Endnotes

¹William H. Poteat. 1985. *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*. Durham: Duke University Press.

²Michael Polanyi. 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

³*Polanyian Meditations (PM)* pp. 14-25; 26-31.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵Poteat, *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection (RG)*. Albany: State University Of New York Press, p. 47.

⁶*PM*, p. 15.

⁷*PM*, p. 227.

⁸*PM*, p. 253.

⁹*RG*, p. 6.

¹⁰Walter B. Mead. 'William Poteat's Anthropology: "Mindbody in the World."' *Tradition and Discovery*, 21: 1 (1994-95): 33-3, p. 34.

¹¹*PM*, p. 10.

¹²*RG*, p. 17.

¹³*PK*, p. 208

¹⁴Polanyi. 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City: Doubleday, p. 61.

¹⁵ *TD*, p. 61.

¹⁶ *TD*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *PM*, p. 226.

¹⁸ *PM*, p. 236.

¹⁹ *PM*, p. 226.

²⁰ *PM*, p. 218.

²¹ *PM*, p. 218.

²² *RG*, p. 212.

²³ *PM*, p. 16.

²⁴ *PM*, p. 17.

²⁵ *PM*, pp. 17-18.

²⁶ *RG*, p. 208.

²⁷ *RG*, p. 209.

²⁸ *RG*, p. xix.

²⁹ *PM*, p. 18.

³⁰ *PM*, p. 219.

³¹ Poteat. 1998. "Cézanne and the Numinous Power of the Real" (CNPR, unpublished manuscript),
p. 34.

³² "CNPR", p. 40.

³³ *RG*, p. 1.

³⁴ *PM*, p. 22.

³⁵ *PM*, p. 228.

³⁶ *PM*, p. 269.

³⁷ *PM*, pp. 272, 283.

³⁸ *PM*, p. 234.

³⁹ *PM*, p. 250.

⁴⁰ *PM*, p. 29.

⁴¹ *PM*, p. 253.

⁴² *PM*, p. 224.

⁴³ Poteat. 1990. *Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations (PD)*. Columbia: University of
Missouri Press, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *RG*, p. xvi.

⁴⁵ *PD*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ *PM*.

⁴⁷ *PM*, p. 262.

⁴⁸ *PM*, p. 252.

⁴⁹ *PM*, p. 220.

⁵⁰ *PM*, p. 254.

⁵¹ *RG*, p. xxii.

⁵² *PM*, p. 215.

⁵³ *PM*, p.45.

⁵⁴ *PM*, p. 277.

⁵⁵ *RG*, 213.

⁵⁶ C.f. *PM*, p. 184.

⁵⁷ *PM*, p. 190.

⁵⁸ *PM*, p. 192.

⁵⁹ *RG*, p. xvii.

⁶⁰ *RG*, p. 4.

⁶¹ *PK*, p. 164.

⁶² *PM*, p. 192.

⁶³ *PK*, p. 267 / *PM*, p. 192.

⁶⁴ *RG*, pp. 2, 1.

⁶⁵ *RG*, p. xix.

⁶⁶ *RG*, p. xiv.

⁶⁷ Dale Cannon 'Haven't You Noticed That Modernity Is Bankrupt? Ruminations on the Teaching Career of William H. Poteat', *Tradition and Discovery*, 21: 1 (1994-95): 20-32, p. 23.