

# POTEAT'S USE OF POLANYI: AS FERTILE GROUND AND POINT OF DEPARTURE



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## Abstract

*William Poteat acknowledges a profound debt to Michael Polanyi, yet claimed not to be doing Polanyian scholarship. So what was the relationship of the former to the latter? Polanyian motifs important to Poteat include the fiduciary, creativity of knowledge, personal agency, critique of reductionism, and the confessional mode. In addition, Poteat goes beyond Polanyi in his rich humanistic background, his sense of the tragic, the need for a new language and method for philosophy commensurate with the dialectical nature of truth, the concept of “mindbody,” the centrality of speech/orality to human being.*

I begin with a paradigm of cognitive dissonance: in 1874, at the Paris studio of the photographer Nadar, a group of French painters ostracized by the art establishment exhibited paintings revealing a new approach to seeing the world. Louis LeRoy, the art critic for the weekly paper *Le Charivari* expressed the view of most of society by describing the show and its shared technique of “Impressionnisme” as “outrageous”—his judgment of works by the artists Manet, Pissarro, Degas, Renoir, Monet, and Cezanne.<sup>1</sup> I suspect many people who read William Poteat’s work for the first time can sympathize with Louis LeRoy—the language, the syntax, the allusions and references

are so far removed from their normal readings in contemporary philosophy that they find themselves thinking, if not saying, “Outrageous!”

Those who know Poteat’s work have been sensitized to this problem by Poteat himself and the thinkers he studied. We see it in Kierkegaard’s “indirect method,” Wittgenstein’s acknowledgement of the strangeness of his work, Poteat’s own analysis of the residual Cartesianism of Popper, Freud, Steiner, and Percy, and in his repeated warnings that he is not doing philosophy in the usual way—and should not be read that way; indeed, he says at one point, “...dropping out is the most radical philosophical feat” and Poteat certainly “dropped out” of the professional guild of philosophy in many ways.<sup>2</sup> So I begin by suggesting that one of the themes most to be engaged in understanding Poteat, one of the central emblems of his work, concerns how to read him: permeating everything Poteat writes about Michael Polanyi—and other topics as well—is irony, indirection, a double vision. As Poteat himself put it in a strange biographical note he wrote for Duke Divinity School in 1964: “The fact that I have said that all of this about myself is so, makes all of it to be somewhat less than so” (Poteat 1964, 51).

Out of sympathy for a “first reader” of Poteat, however, let me introduce my essay in a more conventional way. As part of the focus on Poteat’s relation to Michael Polanyi, this article first surveys quite briefly those “places where Poteat chose to develop his own position in Polanyian language and structures,” in Diane Yeager’s words. It then turns to Poteat’s contributions to philosophy beyond Polanyi that are due to weaknesses in Polanyi’s approach, the radical implications of Polanyi’s thought which remained hidden for most readers, but which Poteat sought to excavate, and finally Poteat’s distinctive motifs which cannot be found in Polanyi’s work *per se* (Yeager 2008, 31-38).

## Fertile Ground

Poteat himself stated it clearly: “My debt to Polanyi is profound and conspicuous” (Poteat 1985, 8; hereafter *PM*), and his relation to Polanyi was perceptively probed by eight papers in an issue of *Tradition & Discovery* devoted to “The Philosophies of William Poteat and Michael Polanyi.” So my best advice on this topic is to re-read the Prologue to *Polanyian Meditations*, and to review carefully that issue of *Tradition & Discovery* (35, no. 2 2008). Let me lift out a few of the items that caught my eye in that symposium, particularly in Diane Yeager’s and Dale Cannon’s articles. From Polanyi’s “deeply interiorized motifs,” Poteat stresses the following:

- a. Knowledge and action are grounded in faith, in the tacit commitments and subsidiary clues upon which the knower must rely in order to make any claim about the world. Here Polanyi provided a well-argued response to the

assumption of modern philosophy that only absolutely certain conclusions, arrived at through radical skepticism, could be called “knowledge.” Poteat speaks in one place of the “cloud” under which A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* put the humanities, and clearly he saw Polanyi’s work as a life-line to those struggling to preserve the sensibleness of non-scientific language.<sup>3</sup> Though Polanyi himself connected the “faith” of knowing with religious faith (*PK*, 280-286), he only occasionally alludes to this connection, though it was a move congenial to Poteat, (Nickell and Stines 1993, 118ff.).

- b. A second Polanyian contribution to Poteat’s program was his insistence on the dynamic character of knowing, a process best exemplified in discovery, creativity, and action rather than in the purely ideational products of concepts and theories. Knowing is an intellectual passion, a heuristic enterprise by which the seeker gropes toward “a revelatory unfolding of the only now known.” Yeager perceptively notes that Polanyi’s term “heuristic passion” “also gave [Poteat] a name for his own driving, striving, searching, restless journey,” which seems an apt description of Poteat’s manner of being (Yeager 2008, 33).
- c. A third, related way in which Polanyi helped Poteat was in providing greater resources for the recovery of personal agency in philosophical discourse. Poteat’s interest in the later Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy had already alerted him to the importance of restoring the first person pronoun to the center of epistemology, but Polanyi’s discussion of “emergence” helped Poteat see “the possibility of recasting the reflexive, reflective “I” as the composite, thoroughly temporal mindbody that dominates [his] late books.” Indeed, Yeager argues that “this attempt to give some sort of philosophical account...of agency and therefore freedom constitutes Poteat’s most distinctive and most significant contribution” (Yeager 2008, 34).
- d. I want to suggest also that in Polanyi’s work Poteat gains an important ally in his opposition to positivistic science. Though Poteat himself rarely discusses the actual workings of science, he does refer at important points to the “reductionistic ethos of modernity,” to “reductionism,” and describes Polanyi’s work in one place as “the most comprehensive and integral assault upon behaviorism or reductionism of which I know.”<sup>4</sup> Poteat’s use of B.F. Skinner, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin in some classes, his criticisms of Karl Popper and A.J. Ayer, and his approval of Sigmund Koch’s critique of Skinnerian behaviorism show that he is aware of the weight of modern science in distorting society’s understanding of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Poteat himself had little interest in the details of the science-humanities debate, perhaps in part because Polanyi had handled that challenge so well, certainly beyond Poteat’s ability to do so.

- e. Finally, Poteat is struck by the confessional mode which Polanyi employs in *Personal Knowledge*, and that is precisely the mode he himself employs in his late books. Roughly one-third of his essay “Upon First Sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge*” is devoted to a discussion of the rhetorical device of confession and its implications (Langford and Poteat 1968, 13-18). The use of the first person singular pronoun is a solecism for critical intellectual discourse, announcing as it does that one has not placed private, personal intuitions under the judgment of universal, objective standards, and so the persistent use of “I” in Poteat’s late books confirms Polanyi’s claims about personal knowledge, displays Poteat’s owning of responsibility for what he has written, and signals to the reader that a different form of knowing and being is present here.

We could, of course, greatly extend this list of Polanyian contributions to Poteat. Wally Mead states that “...the real genius of Poteat, to my thinking, is this determined effort to *eliminate the stark dichotomy* of the ‘inner-self’ and the ‘outer-world,’ and therefore the split between mind and body...” that Polanyi sometimes, but not always overcame (Mead 2008, 12).

Ron Hall has pointed out that Poteat’s reservations about the universal application of Wittgenstein’s model of language games probably comes from Polanyi’s steadfast emphasis on the person as speaker as the center of language, and (though Poteat does not take this step) one might conclude with Rush Rhees that *conversation* is therefore the better model for language than games (Hall 2008, 21-22).

Kieran Cashell sees Polanyi’s presence in Poteat’s writings as “ubiquitous; it informs everything at an infrastructural level.” Using Polanyi’s terminology, Cashell labels the relationship of Poteat to Polanyi as an *apprenticeship*, suggesting that *PM* is a “written report” on the embodied epistemology that Poteat saw in Polanyi. He goes so far as to say that “Poteat’s authorship is mediated Polanyi” (2008, 48-50).

Such brief comments do not do justice, of course, to these various treatments of Polanyi and Poteat, but perhaps they can serve to indicate the rich and varied resonances that have been heard between the two men, resonances that will not yield, we might say, an exact score of either man’s compositions, but will still allow us to enjoy their two-part harmony. The second of my aims was to sketch “Poteat’s contributions to philosophy beyond Polanyi,” and to that I now turn.

## Point of Departure

(1) Poteat’s dis-ease with critical philosophy began a few years before he read Polanyi, in his dissertation on Pascal and Descartes, an emblem of the first difference

between the two men—namely, the depth and reach of Poteat’s cultural background in the humanities, perhaps parallel in some ways to Polanyi’s competence in science. As Gus Breytspraak put it, “there is a much broader and deeper agenda being set” in Poteat’s early work than he found in Polanyi, an agenda that incorporates philosophy, literature, art, and theology, as well as a good bit of Freud, and enabled him to develop “personal knowledge” beyond Polanyi (Breytspraak 2008, 18). As one small example, consider Poteat’s identification of the problem of critical philosophy as “gnosticism” in the “Prolegomenon” to *Recovering the Ground*:

I gaze Northeastward across the Atlantic...and I wonder: can we survive our millennial addiction to gnostic apocalypticism...? Gnosticism, older than the Western world, an ever present religion deep in the western soul, ... is the belief that men and women are pure spirits, now held captive in the prison of this world created by an evil demiurge from which alone esoteric gnosis can set them free (1994, xi).

Gnosticism is not a Polanyian term, but to anyone in the humanities, particularly in religion or philosophy, it is rich in connotations, allusions, reverberations that quite easily extend the discussion of critical philosophy into new directions. Poteat’s humanism both *enables* his reaction to critical philosophy and also *enhances* that reaction beyond what could be accomplished by the scientist or philosopher alone, as his acute reading of texts shows so well (see Nickell and Stines 1993, Pt. Three).

(2) Second, I recall a comment made in seminar by Poteat, probably in the fall of 1971, that Polanyi had little sense of the tragic. Poteat’s reference, as I remember it, was to Polanyi’s time in Austin, Texas, the previous spring, where he gave what would be his last series of lectures. Polanyi had just celebrated his 80th birthday, and according to Scott and Moleski in the biography, “Polanyi was aware that his ability to marshall details in a coherent argument was fading. Poteat found conversations increasingly exhausting, since he was expected to supply what Polanyi was unable to remember” (Scott and Moleski 2005, 278). Poteat’s reference in class to this experience was to Polanyi’s having invested his entire life in intellectual activity and now that his mind was going, not knowing what to do. He had few resources, personal or professional, to cope with such an eventuality and was increasingly depressed about it. My memory is that Poteat was referring to the absence of a religious faith in Polanyi adequate to this time in life, and also to the essentially Enlightenment confidence in reason that had sustained Polanyi for so long, but which now was betraying him.

It is difficult, of course, to assess a person's thinking at this time of life, since none of us has lived through a similar situation, but I think there is at least some truth in Poteat's observation. I have looked at the boxes in the Polanyi archive at Chicago that deal with the period of World War II and just afterward, and found no sustained attention by Polanyi to the Holocaust, despite the fact that many of his own family members died in the camps and almost all of them suffered radical disruptions in their lives, many ending as exiles. Polanyi tried to help some of his relatives find shelter and work in England or America, but while the war caused him to write energetically about the political and economic challenges caused by fascist and communist governments, there is silence about one of the greatest tragedies of that bloody century, namely the destruction of the European Jews.<sup>6</sup> *PK*, published thirteen years after the end of the war, contains numerous references to "dictatorship" and "totalitarianism," but very few to the moral or spiritual destructiveness of these regimes. Though Polanyi was not a practicing Jew, he was forced to leave Germany in 1933 because he was Jewish by the Nazi definition. This is not to say that Michael Polanyi did not feel this tragedy deeply, but that he did not include this darkness in his reflections on the modern age. Perhaps a certain optimism is necessary in order to do great science.

In contrast, the "shadow side of life" was a continuing concern for William Poteat, as can be seen particularly in the early essays "Tragedy and Freedom" (1956), "The Absence of God" (1956), and "Anxiety, Courage, and Truth" (1966), as well as in later essays like "Persons and Places" (1974) and "The Banality of Evil: The Darkness at the Center" (1988). He writes:

For us knowledge tends to be associated with heroism and unqualified beatitude.... Yet—it has not always been held, nor is it true. A deeper human sensibility has shown that truth is not only won at a price, but painful when won; that knowledge is always an ambiguous good, concealing a threat; that catastrophe is associated with the loss of innocence.<sup>7</sup>

He then points to the myths of Oedipus, Adam, and Faust in order to show the relevance to human knowing of the various forms of darkness. And while this is not a concern of the last three books, I do not believe it is entirely absent from any of his writings, which is not true of Polanyi.

(3) A third way in which I see a distinctive difference between Polanyi and Poteat is in the latter's awareness of the degree to which all of western thought has been warped, truncated, or distorted by the critical temperament, such that a new language is necessary to oppose it. Poteat had suggested in "Upon First Sitting Down to Read

*Personal Knowledge*” that Polanyi’s difficulty for new readers was precisely his use of terms according to a post-critical sensibility, but in his own work this feature is raised, or deepened, to the level of a central motif (Poteat 1968, 3). This is the feature of irony, of suspicion referred to as I began this essay, and it has been well explored by Dale Cannon, who identifies it with Kierkegaard’s double-reflection:

Largely from Kierkegaard, I believe, Poteat early on learned that the human condition is (and fundamental concepts about it are accordingly) through and through “dialectical”—which is to say ambiguous: Nothing is simply what it seems to be on the surface, particularly not what it appears to be to detached, “objective” reflection.... What is needed is a sensitivity to the ironic possibilities in existence.... Unless a person becomes aware of and sensitive to this, she or he is liable to misunderstand and mistake what Poteat was all about and what he found in Polanyi (Cannon 2008, 25).

As Poteat makes clear in the Prolegomenon to *Recovering the Ground*, the style of his later works was intentional and the tone, I might say, aggressive. Here is a characteristic example:

...the present essay is not about anything. In its style – awkward syntax, non-linear progression, reflexivity, dialectical reduplication, an unfamiliar and often deliberately “atonal” diction congested with what will appear to be pretentious or merely clever coinages that, together, allow my radical insight lucidly to oppose itself to the conceptual landscape from which it has been elicited and to impede yet another bemused lapse into our familiar dualisms—I have obeyed the demand upon me of this primitive reality to educe and then body forth the logos that endows my mindbody with sentience, motility, and orientation, both before I have yet spoken and after I do, as itself the condition of speech (Poteat 1994, xiv).

This is not a sentence that tries to woo its reader, to lead her gently into a colloquy with Poteat. He continues the explanation by comparing his reader to a “beholder of Cezanne’s paintings,” and claims his “text is like a fully developed Cubist painting.” His aim, therefore, is “to place the reader in an agonistic relation to the text. The rhetoric seeks by reduplication to embody dynamically in its own tension the actual intentional structure of our feats of knowing...” (Poteat 1994, xv). Cannon helpfully comments

on this “reduplication:” its point is to get us (Poteat’s readers or audience) to focus on the content of reflection (“the what”), but also to become aware of our own state of mind and life as we relate existentially to that content (“the how”). When practicing such double-reflection, we should gradually become aware of the cultural means—the pictures, metaphors, assumptions—with which we rely in our reflection on “the what,” and how they distort our understanding. “They skew our take upon the world and abstract us from ourselves” (Cannon 2008, 25).

As my first quote from Cannon indicated, this double-reflection extends deep into the human condition. “All truth as truth, considered existentially, is inherently and essentially dialectical”—that is, truth’s disclosure of itself is directly dependent on the knower’s relationship to that truth, on her authenticity and passion. To say that “truth is subjectivity” is to point to this feature that makes it impossible to “objectively,” distantly, coolly, dispassionately, detachedly understand truth. To do so would be to focus on “the what,” while ignoring “the how.” This was fundamental to Poteat; “sometimes *Polanyi* was aware of and sensitive to this, at other times he was not. And that is, in large measure,” Cannon concludes, “where the difference between them lies” (Cannon 2008, 25).

That Poteat was sensitive to the “how” of doing philosophy is easily seen in his last three books, where he adopts a distinctively new style of philosophical reflection. In the introduction to *A Philosophical Daybook*, Poteat describes his method:

What I began to do in 1987...was to sit down in my study every morning and, in a leather-bound book of blank pages, write down my reflections upon whatever philosophical perplexity was made to surface as I tried to learn what my way of thinking had become.... For myself ... [these pages] are an attempt to represent a certain new style of dwelling in one’s mindbody in the world. I have therefore avoided editorial tampering with what was written in the longhand draft, hoping thereby to keep you as close as I found I had to keep myself to the concrete agonistic, fully mindbodily activity of putting words upon the page in my own fair hand, which is, after all, one of the things that thinking is (Poteat 1990, 3).

Not only have Poteat’s ideas about philosophy changed, but also his understanding of how one should do philosophy: it should be done consistent with one’s mindbodily being. Everything must serve “*real life*, that is, life that is potent with the unacknowledged configurations of meaning, coherence, order, and value....” The writing longhand, the dating of each entry, the continuing to write only so long as a train of thought continues, the refusal to edit the text “for the sake of some Cartesian conceit,”



in the awkward language described above—all of these were strategems for avoiding a relapse into Cartesianism. The result is that “It will be immediately obvious that this is no work of scholarship.... What I aspire to for you is the same thing I have sought for myself: growing consolidation in a post-critical mode of mindbodily being...” (Poteat 1990, 3-5).

One last innovation of language should be mentioned, namely the crucial term “mindbody.” The stimulus and conversation partner in this particular move is probably not Polanyi, but Merleau-Ponty in his exploration of the irreducible coherency of body, mind, and perception in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Through his own phenomenological examination of his bodily being in thinking, writing, bike-riding, and playing tennis, Poteat reveals the insidious tendency of the critical tradition to make us think of our body as a thing like other things, when in fact it is, for us, radically unlike anything else in the universe. These phenomenological analyses—a good example is Poteat’s analysis of his act of reading a paragraph in the *Meditations* (Poteat 1985, 182-187)—are original contributions to a re-visioning of philosophy, and help demonstrate what “mindbody” looks like in ordinary experience. Poteat’s description of “incarnate knowing,” characterized by the temporal, the embodied, and the oral imagination, tends to assume greater and greater importance for him as time goes on: “Our mindbodies, among whose existential modalities are form, order, meaning, and beauty, are the paradigms of the real” (Poteat 1985, 232). The mindbody is the center from which all our stretching forth toward the world commences.<sup>8</sup>

(4) Beyond noting the language used in Poteat’s writings, we must also remember that a major way in which he extends Polanyian thought is in his placing speech at the center of our mindbodily being. I want to remind readers of several facets of this theme:

First, Poteat’s early writings show a keen awareness of the need to insist that a speaker is an agent whose existence cannot be reduced or assimilated to its behavior, since the “I” of human speech is “systematically elusive” and logically unique. Surely Pascal and Kierkegaard have predisposed Poteat to this defense of the self against those who, like Gilbert Ryle, would efface all interiority (Yeager 2008, 34-35).

Second, one of the real strengths of *Polanyian Meditations* is the way that Poteat uses contemporary research in orality by linguists and anthropologists—Jack Goody, Walter Ong, Joseph Church, Colwyn Trevarthen, and William Condon—to extend and deepen his claim that it is in the oral/aural world of speech that language has its primitive home, rather than in the world of written texts (Poteat 1985, 153-197). He contrasts this at every point with the picture of language bequeathed us by the visual model of language that underlies the critical tradition, in which the world is rendered in a dead slice of visual space that systematically eliminates the temporal, dynamic

place in which persons have their natural home (see Poteat 1985, 50-92 as well as Nickell and Stines 1993, 23-42).

And finally, I think that for Poteat, the quality of language, particularly human speech, that makes it such a powerful constituent of our humanity is its metaphorical richness. In the etymological excursions in the *Meditations* he is signaling the many layers of intention, orientation, and implication contained in our speech, that bind our mindbody together with that of others and so makes both knowing and communication possible. It is not clarity, as Cartesianism claimed, that denotes knowledge, but richness of meaning, and revealing and celebrating this is the burden and the glory of the humanities.

I have gone on too long, and yet not said nearly enough. But this will have to do for now, and I will simply close these comments on Poteat with the advice: *Read his books.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“Impressionisme.” *The Oxford Companion to French Literature*, ed. P. Harvey and J.E. Heseltine (Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup>The phrase “dropping out” is from “Reflections on Walker Percy’s Theory of Language,” in Nickell and Stines (1993, 233). Poteat comments on the necessity of his awkward style and quotes Wittgenstein in a note (Poteat 1985, 7).

<sup>3</sup>See Poteat’s comments on Ayer in Langford and Poteat (1968, 205-206).

<sup>4</sup>These references are from Poteat’s letters to Duke President Doug Knight and Provost Taylor Cole about the project of *Intellect and Hope*, described in Breyspraak and Mullins’ paper in this issue of *Tradition & Discovery*.

<sup>5</sup>On Popper, see Nickell and Stines 1993, 201ff.; on his use of the writings of Skinner, Marx, and Darwin in classes, see Breyspraak 2008, 15. Koch taught at Duke and was also a member of the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity (SGFCU) in which Poteat participated.

<sup>6</sup>The biography confirms this, as there are no indices for “Jews” or “Holocaust,” and the pages on the war and postwar years are primarily on his work on economic and political issues. See Scott and Moleski 2005, 152-54, 162-63, and 171-172. But also see p. 128.

<sup>7</sup>“Anxiety, Courage, and Truth,” in Nickell and Stines 1993, 280. In “The Banality of Evil,” Poteat refers to the Holocaust explicitly (Nickell and Stines 1993, 3-6).

<sup>8</sup>Some of the language in my account here is taken from my article “William Poteat: The Primacy of the Person,” in *Appraisal*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Oct. 2008): 31-37. This was reprinted in *Tradition & Discovery*, 40/2 (2013-2014): 36-45.

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