

Haven't You Noticed That Modernity Is Bankrupt?

Ruminations On The Teaching Career of William H. Poteat¹

Dale Cannon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cerebral systems of [spirit].²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

be conducted. Poteat describes them as texts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The incident in question occurs when Mole and Rat

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And that's how it was!

Endnotes

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

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

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

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

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

⁶Ibid., p. 19.

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

⁸Ibid., p. 2.

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

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

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

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

¹³Palmer, p. 69ff.

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

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

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