

Further Thoughts on Polanyi's Relation to What Bill Poteat Was Doing after His
Orphic Dismemberment
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Over the last decade, I have had the joy and great privilege of working with Phil Mullins on four articles and two presentations on the Study Groups from 1965 to 1972, inspired by and involving, to a greater and lesser extent, Michael Polanyi.¹ As many readers of Tradition and Discovery (hereinafter TAD) know, Phil's grasp of intricate details of Polanyi's life and writings from his many decades of Polanyi scholarship is unsurpassed; his generosity in sharing what he knows seems inexhaustible. If you have received, or been copied on, any of the countless, detailed email responses he has sent all over the world when asked about matters related to Polanyi, you will agree. I learned much about Polanyi from our work together, and I greatly enjoyed our convivial pursuit of discovery as we probed letters, grant proposals, reports, and writings related to those important Study Group conferences and meetings. This essay continues exploring a central question that arose from that earlier research for me: the relation of Polanyi to Bill Poteat's work after his "Orphic Dismemberment" in 1968. A (twice) longer and more thorough version of this essay is available by request from the author.

At the 2022 AAR Denver Meetings, Mark Jurgensmeyer chaired a session on Matteo Bortolini's magnificent *Joyfully Serious Man: The Life of Robert Bellah* (see Peter Blum's review in the July 2023 issue of *TAD*). Before introducing the distinguished panel and the author, Jurgensmeyer, recalled with enthusiastic nostalgia times in Berkeley when he and other graduate students and young faculty gathered over drinks to puzzle over "What is Bob Bellah up to?"

His account brought back vivid memories of gatherings beginning in 1967 at Duke, where Hall, Breyspraak, Churchill, and later Yeager, Keiser, Bernal, and others debated "What Is Bill Poteat doing?" Earlier, I am sure that Cannon, Stines, Ladner, St. Clair, Haddox, and others had done the same, and even later there were cohorts like Berkman, Carter, Jardine, Johnston, and Newman.

With giants like Bellah and Poteat, that conversation continues long after graduate school as evidenced by Polanyi Society conferences on Poteat and Polanyi (Washington 1993, Loyola 2008, Yale 2014), dozens of articles in *TAD* and elsewhere, and books devoted to the works and teaching of William H. Poteat (Nickell and Stines 1993, Cannon and Hall 2015). All of these add to our understanding of what Poteat was doing, and many address Polanyi's relation to it.

Phil Mullins, unlike most of those who have pondered this question, never studied with Poteat. I, who sat at Poteat's feet for almost nine years, have puzzled about what Poteat was doing and how it related to Polanyi for five decades. But both of us found the questions about their relationship of great interest. Poteat was very closely associated with Polanyi for more than a decade beginning in the mid-fifties, and many think of him as a "Polanyian" and the most important American intellectual in spreading Polanyi's influence.

While conducting our research on the Study Groups, we were puzzled by Poteat's absence, after the Bowdoin Conferences, from the twenty-plus meetings across the world from 1967–72, largely coordinated by Marjorie Grene. This noticeable absence followed Poteat's heavy involvement in the two Bowdoin Conferences, including assistance in planning the conferences, moderating sessions, writing papers for discussion, and most importantly, the publication of many of the Bowdoin papers and authors in *Intellect and Hope*, a major volume on applications of Polanyi's thought which Poteat edited with Thomas Langford. Why did he choose not to attend any of those groups after the Bowdoin Conferences?

As Phil and I prepared the presentation I gave at the 2014 Yale Conference, we documented Poteat's great enthusiasm for Polanyi's work culminating with the final editing of *Intellect and Hope* in 1967. This is clear in correspondence with his provost (describing the volume as "the most comprehensive and integral assault upon behaviorism of which I know—save only Polanyi's work itself"). To his president at Duke, Poteat wrote "the name of Polanyi and his work is coming to be associated with Duke as Husserl with Louvain" (Breytspraak and Mullins 2015, 25-26).

So Poteat's involvement in the Bowdoin conferences, his publications, his high estimation of Polanyi's importance, his attempts to convene a major conference on Polanyi at Duke and to get a chair established there for Polanyi, and his close personal relationship with Polanyi involving numerous times spent together beginning in 1956 and including Polanyi's term at Duke in 1964 are all evidence of his involvement in and commitment to what we called "Polanyi's grand program" (see endnote 1).

But Phil and I saw a "turn" in 1968 beginning with Poteat's withdrawal by letters to Grene and Polanyi from co-editing Polanyi's "collected papers" published as *Knowing and Being*. He turned from concern with Polanyi's work and influence to focus on his own projects beginning with a long sabbatical in Greece. Early in that sabbatical he experienced what has been described by one of his students as a "conversion" (Johnston, date unknown). He called it his "Orphic dismemberment."

In our earlier presentations and publications, Phil and I left largely unexplored Polanyi's relation to "what Bill Poteat was up to" after his "turn" to

what I now describe as the “late” or “post-Orphic dismemberment” phase of Poteat’s work.

My recent research, involving new sources, has given me a much clearer answer to this question as I shall explain below.

These sources include a bag of materials given to Phil by the widow of Walter Mead, most of which I assume are in the Poteat collections at Yale. I will also draw extensively on Poteat’s own reflections at the 1993 Polanyi Society/AAR Meeting in Washington. I was unable to attend the 1993 sessions, but I recently listened to and transcribed a fuzzy recording that has been in my files for decades. The transcription as well as sound files of the 1993 sessions are now on the Polanyi Society website. You can also find there the recording of a Zoom discussion of those 1993 sessions from March 2, 2023.

Orphic Dismemberment and the 1968–76 Transitional Period

Descriptions of an experience like the one Poteat had that October evening in Athens in 1968 are necessarily poetic. It involved an overwhelming experience of a sculpture he encountered in the window of the studio of Moutakas, with whom he became a close friend (Poteat 1985, 2ff).

It appears to me that it took almost eight years for him to begin to teach and write about it beyond a short essay. Parenthetically, these were the years (1967–76) that I was closest to Poteat, first as a divinity student, then as his graduate student and teaching assistant, then as a dissertation advisee, then as a part-time and eventually full-time faculty member for one year in the undergraduate religion department that he moved into and began chairing during those years.

I do not remember him discussing this Orphic dismemberment experience, even though he was obviously taken with Moutakas’s sculpture and arranged for an exhibit of his work at Duke in 1970. I have asked others from those years, and none of us remember him talking to us about his Orphic dismemberment in those years. Apparently, there was some discussion of the experience in letters with his earlier students from what I said in my Yale presentation in 1914, after having spent the preceding day dipping into letters to and from Poteat (Breytspraak 2014).

Poteat’s own published testimony is that this sudden experience left his “projected program of research in shambles” and radically changed what he had been attempting to do for many years (“trying to rend from this side the veil that separated me from myself”). With this Orphic dismemberment, he now was able “to begin to approach myself from another side—one from which there was between me and myself no indigenous veil of Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment” (1985, 2).

What did this mean for the relation of his project to Polanyi? “Returning to Polanyi, I discovered equivocations, complexities—and profundities—I had not

hitherto noticed.” Note this is after more than a decade of teaching graduate seminars on *Personal Knowledge*, extensive editing of essays for *Intellect and Hope*, spending many hours with Polanyi, and hosting Polanyi for a semester when he gave the Duke lectures! “He was more difficult, more radical than I had been able to see or say when, in 1967, I had sat down to write the introduction to *Intellect and Hope*, ‘Upon First sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge*’” (1985, 8).

In the transitional eight-year period after his Greek experience and prior to beginning to write *Polanyian Meditations* (hereinafter *PM*), he returned to exploring the “canon” (primarily Wittgenstein, Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, Kierkegaard, and Polanyi) with students. Others were introduced from time to time including Paul Ricoeur, Walker Percy, Hans Jonas, Joseph Church, George Steiner, and Jean Piaget. He must have begun to approach all these thinkers with his post Orphic dismemberment eyes, and surely this new perspective would have begun to come through in his teaching as he indwelled it. But it was Spring of 1976 before he began to write down his exploration of a new way of knowing and being in a note prepared for his graduate seminar which gradually became *PM* (1985, 8).

This late, Poteat still recognized deep debts to Polanyi but was now attempting “to think out of myself, under the influence of now deeply interiorized Polanyian motifs, about matters nowhere dealt with as such in *Personal Knowledge*.... My debt to Polanyi is profound and conspicuous. But, for good or ill, what follows is my attempt, subject to a long and exigent apprenticeship to him, to think some unthinkable thoughts of my own” (1985, 8).

1993 Washington: The Post-Critical Copernican Revolution

Reflecting on *PM* eight years after its publication, Poteat further clarifies the relation of that book and his two subsequent related volumes to Polanyi. Drawing from my transcription of Poteat’s opening remarks at the 1993 AAR/Polanyi Society Washington meetings, let us hear his explanation of his mature understanding of how his (post Orphic dismemberment) writings are related to Polanyi:

Had I known, as I should have known, that the book that I published under the title *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post Critical Logic* would be known by its title rather than its subtitle, then I should have entitled it “In Search of a Post-Critical Logic: Investigations Precipitated by a Sentence on Page 191 of *Personal Knowledge*.” [laughter]

Now let me be quite clear about one thing: this in no way diminishes my admiration and love for Michael Polanyi, the man, and my indebtedness to Michael Polanyi, the thinker.

It has, however, had the effect as I have discovered amongst people who have tried to read what I have written, believing that these were indeed “Polanyian Meditations” [of having led them] into some unproductive investments of time and energy, because the temptation is quite obvious and the invitation to this temptation is glaring, to try to translate what is being read in *PM* and in *Philosophical Daybook* (hereinafter *PD*) and, as you will see if you will buy the book from SUNY Press, *Recovering the Ground* (hereinafter *RG*)...

...[T]he temptation to try to translate what is happening when you read these books into *Personal Knowledge* or to patch it on to *Personal Knowledge* in some extrinsic way can only delay the process by which the full and proper import of what I have been trying to do will be experienced. (The Polanyi Society, 1993)

Any reader of *PM* immediately recognizes that this somewhat humorous riff about the title and subtitle does not mean that Poteat’s book only concerns pages 190-191 of *Personal Knowledge* or even that those pages are the only jumping-off point in Polanyi’s work for Poteat’s meditations. Polanyi’s work comes up again and again in the book as do other key figures for Poteat: always Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt but also Plato, Pascal, Descartes, Kant, Joseph Church, Hans Jonas, Walter Ong, and others.

Poteat states that the central motifs of *PM* include his view “that rationality, that is the ‘hanging togetherness’ of things for us, and logic, that is, the articulated *form* of the ‘making sense’ of things for us” are all but hidden from us by the “picture that holds us captive” about these matters that we have inherited from the Enlightenment. This distorted picture that even infects our common sense was “formed by critical philosophy beginning with Descartes which increasingly took mathematics and formal logic to be the preeminent (and usually the only) paradigms of the ‘hanging togetherness’ of things and the ‘making sense’ of things.” Contrary to the Cartesianism of our culture, Poteat argues that “formalized rationality—mathematics and formal logic—derives from and remains parasitical upon the ‘hanging togetherness’ and ‘sense-making’ of our integral mindbodily rootedness in the as yet unreflected world and in the unreflected ‘thinkings’ and doings in that world.” (1985, 9)

All of *PM* and the two later books uncover, explore, and apply this unrecognized, unwitting, post-critical “rationality” and “logic” which Poteat finds behind, underneath, and supporting Polanyi’s breakthroughs—where he

succeeds in breaking through. In doing so, Poteat understands himself as going beyond Polanyi's explicit thinking which often remained "conventional."

I want therefore to suggest that the decisive motifs of his thought—those that caused him to wish to and enabled him to mount and sustain a polemic against the critical tradition of the Enlightenment—are embodied in the images of the *personal*, of *knowing as obedience and responsibility*, of the *fiduciary mode of our being mindbodily in the world*, of *our calling* and of the *inexhaustibility of what is real*. If this case can be sustained, it will mean that the "theology" that tacitly informs Polanyi's thought, the images that form the picture that he at once *has* and is *in the midst of*, is at bottom biblical in derivation; and is in any case certainly different from his explicit theological utterance. (1985, 136)

So deep down and underneath, maybe even often in contrast to, Polanyi's more conventional argumentation and backsliding into critical categories, Poteat finds a form of what he terms "Yahwism" (don't bother to look it up because current usage of the term refers to one stream or source in Hebrew Scriptures—not Poteat's meaning of the term). Poteat finds the "rationality" and "logic" based in this Yahwism more compatible with the radically new philosophical position he is straining to articulate and share in his three books.

To flesh out all that Poteat means by "Yahwism" and this new post-critical logic and rationality would require me to repeat much of what he has written. I have found no explanation of the origin of the term in his usage or references to other thinkers who use it with a similar meaning. As far as I know it is idiosyncratic to Poteat, but if anyone can tell me otherwise, I would be very grateful! But along with the "decisive motifs" outlined above, here are some of the key components and terms that I find in Poteat's post Orphic dismemberment project:

- Rejection of the picture that (tacitly and explicitly) shapes our logic and rationality, the sense of coherence and how we come to know it, that has been built up in modernity based on images inherited from the Greeks and refined through the Renaissance and by the critical tradition of Descartes through Kant and positivism.

- Replacement of this "picture" of ultimate reality as static and perception of it modeled on a dead slice of visual space or printed words in a text; replacement of it with a contrasting dynamic ontology modeled on Yahweh's "I will be what I will be" and Yahweh as the paradigmatic speaker.

- Replacement of all searching for a ground or foundation by an exhausting articulation of and defense of our tonic, motile mindbodies in the world as the ground, source, foundation of all meaning making.
- Rejection of our default prioritization of visual, literacy-based models for accessing and describing reality and replacement with an appreciation of speech and its logic, temporality, freedom, dynamism.

How does Poteat uncover and make the case for this new logic, rationality, and conceptual framework that will replace critical philosophy, and indeed most of the philosophical tradition, with his post-critical logic undergirded by Yahwism? Along with the kind of discussion of and debate with key figures in the philosophical tradition that you might expect, there are four main methods I find throughout this dense work.

1. Reflexive phenomenology exploring activities like tennis, jogging, writing, hearing Bach's prelude in C, speaking, especially first-person discourse, and many others.

2. Deep etymological explorations with a commitment to a view of language as being more deeply rooted in our mindbodily being in the world than is usually recognized. In *PD*, Poteat states that "etymology has been my principal instrument of research.... I have discovered from etymology more about my *mind* and my *body*—and especially how they derive and remain grounded in my *mindbody*—than from any other source" (1990, 90).

3. Philosophical exploration of first-person speaking and hearing, so central to his writings in the 1950s and early 1960s, applied to issues in this project.

4. What might be described as historical explorations of alphabetic literacy's impact on Western sensibility with the subsequent subordination of the logic and rationality of speaking to that of seeing texts.

He continues to explore and apply the position staked out in *PM* in his later two books, *PD* and *RG*, both of which present Poteat's further reflections in a diary-styled format with dated entries on various themes and thinkers. Current and historical figures engaged include Derrida, H. R Niebuhr, and, of course, Plato, Pascal, Descartes, Kant, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt. Topics include his method, constant contrasts and comparisons of modernity/Cartesianism/critical/the philosophical tradition with his new mindbodily/post-critical/Yahwist/ way of being and knowing. Just scanning the indices of these books will give you an idea of the incredible breadth of his

reading and experience brought to bear on a wide range of anthropology, epistemology, ontology, and religious reflection.

These works cannot be simply summarized because their intent is to work on the way we think by dismantling many of the standard categories and even the “logic” of how we have come to think as inheritors of the Enlightenment. We do not have an easily available framework into which a summary will easily fit. He often explains why this is so and how tempted we are to “backslide” into modernity’s Enlightenment ways of being and thinking. He often observes his own temptations in that direction.

This new world being explored in *PM* manifests a “Copernican Revolution,” as Poteat claims in his opening remarks at the 1993 Washington Meetings, again quoting from my transcription:

It is to say the least, unseemly immodest of me, if not indeed arrogant, in fact absolutely outrageous, for me to make the claim that I am about to make and that is:

That what you have in the two books already published and in the one yet to come is the achievement of a Copernican Revolution in ontology and derivatively epistemology. [My emphasis to indicate his]

Now I say that, as is obvious, without modesty, first of all because I believe it to be the simple truth. But secondly, I say it because it is only when you approach these texts aware that the center of gravity has been changed for reflection that any of the reading that you do in these materials can bear fruit for you. (The Polanyi Society, 1993)

Imagine, if you follow his analogy, a “summary” of a Copernican pattern of planetary motion being incorporated into the thinking of a Ptolemaic astronomer. But no less a radically new world, Poteat claims, is opened up to us in his writings. Summarizing this, if his understanding of what he has accomplished is at all accurate, in conventional categories is impossible.

While several dozen of Poteat’s students have commented on his project while extending it in numerous directions in their own voices, I cannot undertake an exploration of their insights in this essay. Perhaps closest to providing summary introductions would be several of David Rutledge’s articles (2015), Ron Hall’s introduction to the 1993 session (Breytspraak, 2023), Jim Stines’s introduction to *The Primacy of Persons* (Nickell and Stines, 1993) (hereinafter *PP*), several of Wally Mead’s articles to be discussed below, and the online introductory pages to the Yale Conference and Wikipedia. The latter two were largely shaped by Dale Cannon, and Dale’s other efforts in many articles extend Poteat’s work in Cannon’s own unique voice. Essays by Hall,

Cannon, Rutledge, and others in *Recovering the Personal* (2016) might be the best place for someone to start understanding Poteat's project.

Included in the deeply appreciative essays by these students are occasional questions for Poteat and criticisms of omissions and weaknesses found in his philosophy. Even a brief review of these questions and criticisms is also impossible in this short essay.

Let us turn instead to some of the questions that have been raised about this post Orphic dismemberment project, including questions about its relation to Polanyi's work, by one of the most thoughtful commentators on his work, Walter Mead.

Wally's Bag and the 1993 Washington Meetings

Let us begin by looking into Wally's bag—the book bag filled with notes, letters, reprints, and other materials that Wally's widow, Norma, passed on to Phil. I was given the bag right before the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

Wally, Walter B. Mead (1934–2018), was a professor of Political Philosophy who completed his PhD under John Hallowell at Duke in 1963, after graduating from Yale Divinity School. Late in his graduate study he heard about a young, dynamic professor in Religion and slipped into several of Poteat's graduate seminars as an observer. How closely he followed Poteat in subsequent years is unknown to me, but from documents I have reviewed, it is clear they were in serious correspondence in the 1990s. Wally was asked to referee Poteat's books *PD* and *PP*, by the University of Missouri Press, and their relationship grew even closer after that time, including correspondence, phone calls, and in-person meetings in Chapel Hill, Washington, and, I believe, in Athens, Greece, where Poteat lived from 1994–1999.

Wally was also a serious student of Polanyi who often presented at Polanyi Society meetings and served as president of the Society from 2006 to 2009. Among numerous other contributions to Polanyi and Poteat scholarship, he edited the 2008 issue of *The Political Science Reviewer's* "Symposium on Michael Polanyi" and was a key organizer of the collection of Poteat's literary remains at the Yale Divinity School Library opened in 2014.

Wally's bag contains numerous letters and notes on phone and in-person conversations with Poteat in the nineties. These materials clearly show that Wally read all of Bill's writings very closely—in fact, he "reduced" all the books and many articles by creating "synopses" of hundreds of pages of typed notes surrounded by handwritten notations, comments, and questions.

Consequently, we have in these exchanges between Poteat and this well-trained, theologically and philosophically sophisticated, serious Polanyi scholar (Wally) an excellent case study for how difficult it is to move into Poteat's new world—even for a very serious Polanyi scholar.

One example is the letter from Poteat to Wally dated April 1, 1991, and included as Appendix A to this essay. I don't have Wally's letter, but it is apparent from Poteat's response that Wally has been reading Nickell and Stines's *PP* (1993), a collection which includes Poteat's early writings, and wants to know more about where Poteat is now, post Orphic dismemberment, regarding his "theological affirmations."

In his letter Poteat candidly but complexly begins:

In replying to your kind letter of March 12, I wish both to be responsive to the questions that you ask and faithfully to represent where I actually stand. To do so I fear I shall appear, at least at first, to be riding off at a tangent to your interest. Nevertheless, I feel this is necessary and beg your indulgence.
(1991)

Poteat says he has not looked at most of the older essays Wally has been reading in many years, but he believes:

...I can say that I still stand now where I stood forty years ago in the practice of my life, before God—sometimes actually, sometimes virtually—in the posture of prayer and confession. Over the years these have issued in certain "theological claims" that found their way into my written philosophical reflections.
(1991)

Poteat acknowledges the deeply problematic relationship between his "practice" and the "theological" explicitation of it in reflection that has issued in his three books. In regard to his religious practice on the one hand and his theological and philosophical arguments about it on the other, "I should say that I have hardly changed at all with respect to the first but have laboriously undertaken shifts [of?] the ground upon which to carry out the second" (1991).

What follows is an extraordinary paragraph in which Poteat expands this explanation of his own development through Pascal, Polanyi, and beyond to his radical discovery of the ultimate *arche* from which the logic of all understanding emerges and upon which it never ceases to depend." He says this *arche*

is our convivial sentient, oriented, motile mindbodies in the world anterior to explicit articulation. ...All meaning and meaning-discernment is centered in, radiates from and retrotends this mindbody that achieves such integrity as it may have by being before God, who, while he is above all in magnitude, is also closer

to me than I am to myself. Any theology that does not at least endorse all of that is not my theology. (1991)

He anticipates that his eschewing “the language in which you have posed the question concerning my theological affirmations” may strike Wally as an evasion but that this only illustrates that for him “everything has changed. Many theologians who have taken very different leadings from Polanyi would (in fact have) found all of the above rather bizarre” (1991).

You can read more of Poteat’s attempts to explain to Wally how his mindbody philosophy impacts thinking about how to think about resurrection and the afterlife in Appendix A.

Poteat attached a number of pages from (the still in draft) *RG* with a handwritten note: “I have added these excerpted pages from my current manuscript since I believe they bear obliquely upon the matters taken up in the letter.” These pages (in the published *RG* found on 58-61, 115-128, 128-136) are among the most explicitly “theological” passages in Poteat’s books, including some reflection on H. Richard Niebuhr’s 1989 *Faith on Earth*. Poteat had been strongly influenced by Niebuhr at Yale in the 1940s, and I assume Wally was as well in the late 1950s. Poteat states, “I came to several reflections upon reading Richard Niebuhr’s *Faith on Earth*, the theological essay that I find most congenial to my own investigations” (*RG*, 115).

Poteat convivially closes the letter with: “I wish we might imagine being able to sit down face to face sometime to remove the bugs in all of this. In the meantime, All good wishes...”

The opportunity for a face-to-face discussion occurred two years later at the 1993 Washington Polanyi Society meeting. Wally was the second participant to address Poteat. Apparently, Wally had sent Poteat a draft of the article later published in *TAD* in 1994 (21, no. 1), “William Poteat’s Anthropology: ‘Mindbody in the World.’”

Wally asks several times and in several ways about Poteat’s understanding of ontology in relation to Polanyi’s ontological hierarchy. He presses for a clarification of Poteat’s understanding of reality—particularly in relation to questions of religious truth. Poteat continues to try to help Wally understand why some of his questions no longer make sense to him, as he had explained in his 1991 letter.

Wally Mead begins,

As you know from a manuscript I recently sent you, I’ve been struggling with your use of the word reality especially in the context where you suggest that even our second order, derivative, reflected expressions are, in terms of what they point to, are as real as that which is more primal in our understandings...

In a sense I understand what you are saying but I see that as presenting problems in regard to our sense of hierarchy. If we talk about hierarchy don't we have to suggest that some things ontologically are more significant than others when are we talking about reality?

Or just to append that...are you tying into Polanyi's understanding of reality as that which has potential for bringing out new meanings in the future? (1993a)

Poteat refuses to answer him directly and makes a "cape pass" because, I think, answering him directly would mean accepting the critical and conventional categories Wally relies on in raising the question.

Poteat goes on to explain how our Kantian influenced views lead us astray in thinking about this and why he (Poteat) is uneasy about (Greek) static conceptions of things which he is trying to render dynamic in his post Copernican Revolution state. He is trying to render such categories dynamic, and he compliments Wally for having grasped that better than many of his readers. But sensing that Wally still does not fully comprehend where he is, Poteat continues:

So hierarchy there is, but hierarchy is rooted in my mindbody, and in our joint mindbodies, and in so far as we may say well, amongst us, the following hierarchies obtain, I have no trouble with that. But I would want to say that that hierarchy derives its authority and its place in the hierarchy from our convivial mindbodily existence. Now, does that address to your question? (1993a)

Wally agrees and soon quips as the tape in the recorder is being changed that he is "going to have to listen to that to understand this" and then continues to press one more time for Poteat to place his position in the context of Polanyi's notion of indwelling:

Mead: I don't want to prolong this but I think you answered a statement I came across in your *RG* manuscript. [The book was in press and soon to be released.] I think I am quoting it accurately here: "both the concept of an extra mundane realm, and the extra mundane realm itself to which the concept refers are equally in the world."

Poteat: Yes, isn't that great? I just think that's great.

Mead: Some people would see that as heretical.

Poteat: I know. I think that's why I like it so much. (1993a)

Poteat refers to this part of their exchange in a handwritten letter sent to Wally dated 11/26/93—six days after the Washington meeting (see Appendix B). Poteat slightly mixes up who said what from the recorded meeting (see above):

With a wholly inappropriate (but not, alas, uncharacteristic) self-congratulatory outburst at the sound of my own words, I responded: “Yes, they (my words) are great. But they are heretical.” Taken on their face, they are indeed. I apologize for my heresy and my rudeness. (1993b)

Poteat goes on to say that in the wider context of all that he has written, the statement is consistent.

In the letter, Poteat expands on his stance and appends some copies of pages from *RG* along with referring Wally to pages in *PM*—key paragraphs of which were discussed above. I have included the entire text of this handwritten letter as Appendix B, as it is one more attempt to pull Wally more fully into the post Copernican revolution world which Poteat is trying to indwell and has articulated in his three books.

The pages in *PM* (135-137) to which Wally is referred are those drawn from in my earlier summary of Poteat's Yahwism. They are crucial for answering our question in this essay, for they address quite explicitly the difference between Polanyi's “theology” and Poteat's “Yahwism,” a “theology” for which Poteat finds support in the underlying “logic” of Polanyi by contrast with many of Polanyi's explicit claims about theology and religion in *Personal Knowledge*.

Wally undoubtedly tried to take all of this into account as he revised the manuscript which was published in *TAD* the next year (Mead, 1994).

I find this essay to be one of the best summaries of Poteat's mature position. Wally incorporated his 1994 *TAD* article into a much longer article, “William H. Poteat's Anthropology,” published in *The Political Science Reviewer* (Mead, 1998).

Wally sent the draft of this later article to Poteat in Athens. Notes in the bag from a twenty-five-minute phone call (April 11, 1997) include responses from Poteat indicating that Wally still doesn't quite get the radicality of Poteat's mindbody philosophy by comparison with Polanyi's categories. There are references back to the Washington exchange and to pages 190-191 in *Personal Knowledge*, a passage central to the 1993 discussions. One of Wally's notes from that call quotes Poteat as having said,

I think you misinterpreted my thinking because you put me in the framework of Polanyi's thought. I am not a Polanyian! I probably led you astray in regard to this: the title of my first book [*PM*] was misleading. [Several times throughout this conversation Poteat asserts firmly that he is not a Polanyian.] (Mead, 1997)

The last twenty-seven pages of Wally's 1998 article raise four questions that expand on those raised in their 1991 correspondence and the 1993 face-to-face meeting. There are numerous citations to correspondence with Poteat, some as late as 1997. Wally is still resisting the ontological implications of Poteat's Copernican Revolution and the most radical claims of the mindbody project. He questions Poteat's understanding of reality, transcendence, ontological hierarchy, the "thisness" and "whatness" of being, and mystery.

Wally expresses deep appreciation for Poteat's extension of Polanyi's insights with his exploration of the mindbody's being in the world. But Wally wants to re-institute quite traditional theological and philosophical categories that he sees as compatible with Polanyi's thought while incorporating Poteat's insights into this system.

Teasing all of this apart would show the points at which Wally rejects Poteat's position because of his remaining commitment to Polanyi's explicit and conventional theological positions based in critical philosophy. This could also show some interesting points at which Wally is extending Poteat's thinking beyond even where Poteat has arrived. In my view, Wally too often seems to be thinking in the context of a picture in which the mind is contacting a reality "out there" rather than Poteat's recognition that the mindbody is more radically in the world which it is imaging. In short, Wally is too often forgetting that "a man both *has* and is *in the midst of* such a picture" (1985, 15 and *passim*).

So it seems that Wally was much drawn to Poteat's anthropology but still struggled to bring Poteat's radical mindbody epistemology and ontology into alignment with Polanyi's articulated philosophy, not to mention his own theological and philosophical views. It appears to me that Wally continued to fall into the temptation Poteat warned against in his opening remarks in 1993 quoted above:

In any case the temptation to try to translate what is happening when you read these books into *Personal Knowledge* or to patch it on to *Personal Knowledge* in some extrinsic way can only delay the process by which the full and proper import of what I have been trying to do will be experienced. (1993)

Indeed, knowing what we know from the 1991 letter and Poteat and Wally's references to Wally's draft in the longer recording and transcript, it appears that this opening warning by Poteat in 1993 may have been aimed directly at Wally!

This long correspondence and other communication between Wally and Poteat provide an excellent case study of what is involved in entering Poteat's Copernican revolution. It shows how difficult it is to move there even for a serious student of Polanyi. Indeed, as Poteat explains in the 1993 session and emphasizes at numerous points in his two later books, it is incredibly difficult for Poteat himself to remain in the space he is trying to occupy in the face of the pervasive forces of Cartesian/Enlightenment/Modernity that are "deep in our [and his] bones" (1993).

Why engagement in their profound discussions may be helpful may become clearer from Wally's final footnote summarizing the long and deep dialogue he has had with Poteat:

I think it has been obvious that, even in my critique of Poteat's thought, I am thoroughly indebted to him for his insights. I have been equally fortunate in profiting from his patience in responding, through conversations and letters, to my efforts at understanding his thinking. While he has suggested that I have faithfully represented his views in the descriptive sections I-III of this essay, he is unpersuaded by most of the conclusions. What I have presented in this essay is intended merely to further, very tentatively, the discussion to which he has so valuably contributed—a discussion that I hope will be joined by others. (1998, 344)

Poteat returned from Greece, where he had been living since 1994, in 1999. He died in May 2000. Wally Mead had developed serious vision issues involving several surgeries at the Mayo Clinic according to the 1997 correspondence. Whether they had a chance to dialogue further is unknown to me but can possibly be determined from the Yale archives.

The Post Orphic Dismemberment Poteat and Polanyi's Last Projects

A more comprehensive exploration of the parallels and divergences between "what Bill Poteat was doing" post 1968 and Polanyi's final works (Meaning Lectures and *Meaning*) would require many more pages than my limits for this essay.

Polanyi's attempts, with Prosch's help, to apply his discovery of the structure of tacit knowing and his vision of personal knowledge to understanding meaning in poetry, painting, literature, myth, religion, and other areas were largely conducted in what Poteat would refer to as

“conventional” philosophical frameworks—not the post-critical logic and rationality that Poteat found underlying Polanyi’s thought. The latter is what supports Poteat’s Copernican revolution and its elaboration through his reflexive phenomenology and other modes of thought.

There are major contrasts in sources used, styles, methodologies, and goals of the two projects. Polanyi is continuing to build a grand system; Poteat, after dismantling modernity with his Copernican Revolution, is carefully “recovering the ground.” Earlier he had written it was no easy task to confront and liberate himself and others from

...the absurdities born of a fateful reliance upon a misconceived model of human knowing, human doing and human being, for which the only cure is the disclosure that the model is both plainly wrong and lethal; absurdities to which we need not remain in bondage forever.

But this self-liberation will require a disciplined, arduous, relentless, painful, and patient process of seeking a post-Cartesian intellectual equilibrium, working at every point against the grain of our entire culture, denying ourselves the respite—and the sweet pleasures—of rushing into the streets every fortnight with some new messianic word.” (1993, 42)

These are the closing sentences of “Persons and Places,” an essay circulated earlier to students in the late sixties but first published in 1974 and reprinted in *PP*. By comparison with this brilliant but transitional essay, the later post-Orphic dismemberment Poteat goes beyond exposing the lethal failures of the tradition’s model and begins to describe human knowing, doing, and being with the mindbody as bedrock as he recovers their ground.

The divergence in their projects in no way led to any divergence in their relationship. But even as Poteat kept in close touch with Polanyi after 1968, he does not seem to have wanted to ally himself with Polanyi’s projects or strongly advocate for them. He certainly attended the Texas Meaning Lectures and “served as Polanyi’s memory” in Austin. You can read or listen to his fascinating account of that exhausting experience in the Saturday morning session of the 1993 tapes and read about it in Scott and Moleski (2005, 278). This is mentioned in their discussion of Polanyi’s failing mental powers in his last years. Poteat’s great sadness about Polanyi’s failing mental powers was, to use one of his favorite words, *palpable* to me as he recounted that experience to me one day in his office when he returned to Duke. This conversation remains vivid in my memory to this day.

I now see his exhaustion was from more than Polanyi’s distressing mental decline. His Orphic dismemberment had opened new worlds to explore

beyond the mostly conventional discussions of the late Polanyi, and to deeply engage those explorations would have been taxing for Bill.

Polanyi invited Poteat to help with *Meaning*, and he seriously considered it, as Phil and I have discussed elsewhere (2014, 2015). He was asked to help outline the book in late 1972 before Prosch's arrival to work on it, but the discussed meetings to work on it never happened. Poteat was intimately involved in decisions about whether to place Polanyi's papers at Duke, Toronto, or Chicago in 1974 (2015, 29). The personal friendship remained strong even as Polanyi's mental powers failed, as can be seen in the poignant 1974 letter of Magda Polanyi to Richard Gelwick about Michael's rapid deterioration:

He has written a letter to Bill Poteat to express his pleasure and appreciation, but the letter is such that it cannot be sent, not even to Bill. It is heartbreaking for me to talk about this, but I shall have to explain to Bill why M. has become silent. (2015, 29)

As others have said, we can only imagine how *Meaning* might have been different if Poteat, rather than Prosch, had been the editor/co-author. But I now think the increasing divergence in their projects helps explain why Poteat did not accept the invitations and raises questions about what impact he might have been able to have on it.

Meaning, as published, seems to have been avoided by Poteat. From the absence of references to it in his books and the negative comments by many of his students about that late Polanyi/Prosch project, my guess is that he viewed it with considerable suspicion. Polanyi attempts to integrate a wide range of thinkers into his project, many of whom would be considered "dangerous" by Poteat, not to mention by Marjorie Grene.

Conclusion

Like the graduate students at Berkeley described so vividly by Jurgensmeyer discussed above, as they puzzled about what the great Bob Bellah was doing, Poteat's students cannot avoid similar conversations whenever we meet and, often, when we write.

Entering "Poteat" into the search engine on the *TAD* website turns up ten pages of articles related to Poteat, many of which are by former students exploring the question, "What Was Bill Doing?" They sometimes engage Polanyi explicitly, but do not always reflect the post-critical logic of the Copernican Revolution which Poteat, after 1976, articulated more clearly as he drew from the tacit logic and rationality underneath Polanyi's thought at its most radical.

His encouragement to his students to find their own voices has created a marvelous chorus of themes and explorations, not all of which he would agree with or approve as “post-critical” or fully compatible with his “mindbody Copernican revolution” but all of which he would take delight in engaging. Those of us attempting to follow the path he carved out should do so fully recognizing we will often backslide, as he often found himself doing:

Time and time again, as I circled about my puzzlements, I found myself setting Cartesian traps for myself *in the very framing of my questions*. Cartesianism as an explicit philosophical doctrine is virtually without effect in this culture. It functions however at a tacit level like a repetition compulsion; it is ubiquitous and pervades the atmosphere of our life like chronic depression.
(1990, 5)

For as he told the members of the Polanyi Society in 1993, after boldly proclaiming that he had accomplished a Copernican Revolution,

Now, all of this is in our bones, and so I am not at all suggesting that it is possible for me to come, you know, swaggering in here about a Copernican revolution and have everyone go home a Copernican. On the contrary, I hope only to make your consciences slightly uneasy so that you will sit down and say: “Now wait just a minute...am I back sliding and if so, how?” (1993, 2nd CD)

If this essay has succeeded at all, perhaps that has occurred again for you, as it often has for me, in puzzling once more about “What Was Bill Poteat Doing and How Does It Relate to Polanyi?”

Endnote

¹ See Breytspraak and Phil Mullins (2015), “William H. Poteat and Michael Polanyi: Toward a History of Their Relationship from 1952 through 1976.” This was a summary of a longer presentation at the Yale Conference in 2014 which you can still view at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q00l_cdW-CU. On the Study Groups see also Breytspraak and Mullins (2018), Breytspraak and Mullins (2017); and Breytspraak and Mullins (2020).

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Appendix A

Letter from Poteat to Mead on April 1, 1991, on Duke University Department of Religion letterhead

Professor Walter B. Mead
Department of Political Science
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois 61761-6901

Dear Professor Mead:

In replying to your kind letter of March 12, I wish both to be responsive to the questions that you ask and faithfully to represent where I actually stand. To do so I fear I shall appear, at least at first, to be riding off at a tangent to your interests. Nevertheless, I feel this is necessary and beg your indulgence.

Though I have not looked at most of the pieces you are reading in the Stines-Nickell collection for many years, I believe I can say that I still stand now where I stood forty years ago in the practice of my life, before God—sometimes actually, sometimes virtually—in the posture of prayer and confession. Over the years these have issued in certain “theological” claims that found their way into my written philosophical reflections.

This however tells you very little; indeed next to nothing. The relation, on the one hand, between the “belief” that is implicated in my practice and has its arche’ and authority there and the “theological” explicitation of it in reflection, on the other, has become quite problematic for me and, in a way, goes to the heart of what I have tried to lay bare in Polanyian Meditations, A Philosophical Daybook, and, now, Recovering the Ground.

To make an unquestionably artificial distinction between my mode of dwelling acritically in the world as one who, in the setting of corporate

worship, affirms the Apostles Creed without reservation, on the one hand, and my critically reflective self that wishes to confront the challenge of the Enlightenment skeptic that is in me and all my modern fellows that calls for theological and philosophical arguments on the other, I should say that I have hardly changed at all with respect to the first, but have laboriously undertaken shifts the ground upon which to carry out the second.

In short, my faith (as the logos of the way I live my life) remains essentially unchanged; but my “theology” (understood as the attempt to explicate the logos of that faith) has undergone a radical change—so radical, indeed, that not only has the very notion of “understanding” (that is as old as our philosophical tradition) undergone a redefinition (here, of course, Polanyi with his analysis of the structure of knowing, helped me to articulate intimations I had already derived from my study of Pascal); even more important, I came to see that—cutting beneath the surface of our philosophical tradition, including Personal Knowledge—the ultimate arche’ from which the logic of all understanding emerges and upon which it never ceases to depend is our convivial, sentient, oriented, motile mindbodies in the world anterior to explicit articulation. This last I discovered, I believe, simply by paying painful attention in a radical new way to my own modes of being as through and through responsible to God—standing within my own mindbody, on this earth, with my unique history, in a particular cultural setting, at this time and place, and with these duties. All meaning and meaning-discernment is centered in, radiates from and retrotends this mind body that achieves such integrity as it may have by being before God, who, while he is above all in magnitude, is also closer to me than I am to myself. Any “theology” of “last things” that does not endorse all of that is not my theology.

If these views are sustained, even though they will make almost no difference in the quotidian practice of our lives, they change absolutely everything in our second-order descriptions, explications, and “justifications” of that practice, for which, to put too fine a point upon it, it in fact has, as practice, no need.

There have been, then, few changes in my mode of living my life; only changes—and drastic ones—in ways of thinking and talking about it— theological ways and other ways.

I have, obviously, eschewed the language in which you have posed the question concerning my “theological affirmations.” This will almost certainly strike you at first as an invasion. In my view however it only illustrates how, for me, “everything has changed.” Most theologians who have taken very different leadings from Polanyi would (in fact have) found all the above rather bizarre.

Now, for the question of the afterlife! When I, in the context of corporate worship; declare, inter alia, ...“I believe in the resurrection of the body and the

life everlasting,” I do not take myself to be granting (Cardinal Newman) to a proposition such as $12 \times 12 = 144$ (though even this is no longer quite the same under the new dispensation), but rather to be enacting and identifying in as direct a way as can be (that is, there is nothing second-order, derivative, metaphorical, symbolical about it) one of the features in the structure of the one and only world in which I actually live and move and have my being, in so far as I recognise it as existing before God. And the enactment of the resurrection of the body affirms that I, this particular man, in this history, bearing the scars upon my body and upon my psyche—not a mind, susceptible of existing discarnate, not an immortal ghostliness inhabiting a mortal body for a session—have my being and value through and through in God’s eternal and never failing Providence both in this moment and forever. Questions about the particulars of how this shall be are faithless questions—and irrelevant—rather like the question addressed to St. Augustine: what was God doing before he created the world? Answer: Creating hell for those who ask foolish questions.

But, of course, you ask: is that world real of which the resurrection of the body is a feature that you would have enacted and identified? Answer: as real as any world that is made by our uttered words to appear; for it has exactly the same ground in the asseverations of our convivial mind bodies. And there is no other world.

“Everlasting life,” then, is life in the bosom of God who is Alpha and Omega and in whom my mortal life in history with all its earthly trappings is granted its eternal significance.

I wish we might imagine being able to sit down face to face sometime to remove the bugs in all of this. In the meantime,

All good wishes,
Sincerely, William H. Poteat
Professor of Comparative Studies and Religion

Appendix B

Handwritten letter on yellow legal pad paper from Poteat to Mead 11/26/93

Dear Wally:

Near the end of the Friday night session, as best I can remember, you quoted from Recovering the words: “Both the concept of an extra-mundane realm and the extra-mundane realm to which the concept refers are in—and equally in the world.” With a wholly inappropriate (but not, alas, uncharacteristic self-congratulatory outburst at the sound of my own words, I responded: “Yes, they (my words) are great. But I think they are heretical.” Taken on their face, they are indeed, I apologize for both heresy and rudeness.

If the words are, however, given a wider context they can be apprehended as just consistent with the “heresy” of all that I have written—illustrating perhaps the difference that my project makes to the writing of theology about which Bob Osborn asked and which I answered so poorly.

I am sending some Xeroxed pages from Recovering, with key sections underlined that will help you and exculpate me. I would add that pages 133-136, especially 135-6, of P.M. bears, but less directly upon these matters.

When you have read all of this you will naturally ask, But haven’t you healed all of the old dualisms only to open up an other, between nature and spirit. To which I rejoin as follows:

The terms of an ontological dualism are logical co-implicates. They are taken by their advocates to exhaust the sum of the two sorts of entities that appear in the world in manifold particular ways. When one of the terms of a dualism is reduced to the other, then all of the sorts of entity that there are, however they may appear in the world, are construed to be at ontological bedrock but manifestations of the single sort of entity that there is—whatever the exertions required to sustain such a view. Whether one is a dualist or a monist, the limits of these ontological categories are the limits of the world.

I am alive because my mindbody, through rhythmical acts of inspiration and expiration, is infused with the breath of life (psyche written in Greek). As this living organism I am immured (no gnostic implications here) in the limits of the world and its causalities.

I transcend from and can only transcend from these limits as from its ground through the breath of speech (pneuma written in Greek) that bears forth the words that are the vectors of my always novel acts of “appearing” as spirit.

There is no commensurability, on the one hand, between the absolutely novel and always unique spirit that thus “appears” and, on the other, the world from which it transcends. There is thus no dualism of spirit and nature.

Incidentally, I have no problem at all with Michel’s hierarchical scheme.*

It was splendid seeing you and seeing you in action. Bloomington will not now seem so far away,

Ever Yours, Bill

*With the sole demurrer expressed on the aforementioned pp. 135-136, P.M.

The pages from RG attached to the letter are 22-23, 38-39, and 76-77.