

## Appendix 3

Monday April 11, 1988

Central States SBL/ASOR/AAR Regional Meeting Springfield Missouri

Panel on William Poteat's *Polanyian Meditations* : Richard Gelwick,  
William Breytspraak, Phil Mullins

This file contains:

- my notes for my contribution to the panel,
- my letter to Bill several days after the event which must have an error in the date,
- Bill's response to my letter and the presentation dated April 19<sup>th</sup> - which would have been his 69<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Along with his affirmation of my "introduction" to his major book for the participants, his letter contains interesting insights into:

- his teaching experience at the end of his career,
- his state of mind at retirement,
- his purpose and approach to writing for his last two books,
- and his health in early retirement years before his move to Greece for most of the 1990's.

His letter had enclosures mentioned in the letter which were copies of handwritten pages from what became *A Philosophical Daybook* (1990). He shared copies of his books as he wrote them with me and, I would assume, many of his former students. For example, I have a handwritten draft of *Polanyian Meditations* in my files.

## Muscles Make Assumptions

Presentation to Panel on Polanyian Meditations at AAR Regional, April  
1988

Gus Breytspraak

This session was advertised as “Muscles Make Assumptions” and I think we will get to that very unusual phrase, for it cuts to the heart of William Poteat’s *Polanyian Meditations*. But panelists also make assumptions, and I want to check out some of mine about you before proceeding:

In preparing I assumed that few of those in the audience would have read PM by WHP or anything else by Poteat or Polanyi. Was I wrong? How many of you have read the book? Poteat? Polanyi?

So many of you are here with such questions as:

Who is Poteat? Who is Polanyi? Why is Poteat meditating on Polanyi? Could this have any bearing on my interests and concerns in Religious Studies and beyond? Is there another session which I would be attending? And what will I take away?

The last question can be answered in part by the handout which I’ll allow you to keep if you’ll promise not to start reading it until I refer you to the appropriate section. (The handout had three of the longer quotations from which I draw below, a list of related readings, and the subject-index from PM.)

Contrast your questions with the assessment of PM by one of the leading students and interpreters of Polanyi thought, author of an excellent introduction to Polanyi, general coordinator of the Polanyi Society – our moderator and fellow panelist today today – Richard Gelwick:

“PM is a brilliant piece of work, and of a quality that puts it alongside the most seminal works of this century”

Praise for the book from another noted philosopher includes such assessments as: “imaginative creative goes far beyond Polanyi’s own

thought. PM is a highly original work, it is a work of inspiration with marks of genius.”

I have it on fairly reliable authority that one distinguished professor of philosophy was so moved by PM that upon completing the last page he put the book down and wept. undoubtedly others have cried for different reasons while struggling with Poteat’s work but in this case we can be confident the tears sprang from admiration and appreciation.

My assignment is to introduce you in 15 minutes to a work of this profundity and significance? Surely such assessments and praise from these authorities have already convinced you to order the book. What can I add?

Let me begin by addressing the query: “What is Poteat doing?” For that is not an unfamiliar question to me. I began asking it myself 20 years ago last fall when I enrolled in a course he taught for first year students at Duke Divinity School entitled Christianity and Contemporary Culture 16. Countless times after that, as I took additional courses and eventually completed a doctoral programme under his supervision, I continued to ask myself, I was often asked by others and, even puzzled with Poteat himself about – “What is Poteat doing?”

Poteat is doing his life's work in PM. By that I mean that in PM Poteat integrates and thrusts forward decades of radical inquiry of immense significance and range. But note that I say “Poteat integrates and thrusts forward” rather than that PM is a “culmination.”

One of my former colleagues said that “Bill finally wrote it all down.” I think that is wrong. He didn't. He won't. He could not write it all down. PM is Poteat’s life work in that it is part of the ongoing project on which he embarked more than 4 decades ago. And it will take decades more of effort, by Poteat and those of like mindbody, for us to grope our way through the cultural conceptual maladies that he is concurrently diagnosing and treating in this volume.

What do I mean by describing Poteat’s mindbodily/teaching/writing/thinking/doing as “diagnosing and treating the cultural conceptual maladies of modernity?”

The therapeutic metaphor is fitting. He is engaged in cultural conceptual analysis. The illness is deeply rooted Cartesianism that afflicts modern sensibility in so many destructive forms. Poteat says of Cartesianism as he uses it:

It is first and fundamentally not a set of articulated philosophical doctrines, but rather a picture, lodged with growing authority in the imagination of the West from the end of the Middle Ages on, that is the presupposition of such philosophical doctrines. This picture is comprised of a coherent system of mutually implicated images, metaphors, and analogies that represent man's relation to nature, to his own body, to the world of material objects, to time in history, to his acts of reflection, to his decisions, to his intellect, even to his own ego; and these relations are analogous to the relation that God is conceived to have to the world that he is made out of nothing. Man is here depicted, in other words, as essentially disembrangled from, because transcendent over, and thus autonomous in relation to all of these. (PM 252-253)

What Poteat is doing in PM is an extended exercise of his cultural conceptual analysis and therapy for the ills of Cartesianism, especially in relation to our understanding of how it all hangs together- logic.

The destructive impact of Cartesianism on modernity is no new problem for Poteat. He tells us:

the diagnosis of the nature and the extent of the malaise had first been focused for me in my doctoral dissertation, *Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility*. Here was shaped for me the problem that has occupied me now for more than 30 years: the nature of rationality and logic in an intellectual climate in which Descartes' legates have prevailed and left us culturally insane. (6)

PM takes us beyond the diagnosis of Cartesian insanity and the destructive dilemmas, deceptions, and dichotomies of critical logic into an exploration of how we can come to grasp, in a postcritical logic, the meaning of such fundamental words as cause, form, meaning, order, rationality etc.

He helps us grope our way into an alternative picture of how it all hangs together that allows reconciliation and reconceptualized relationships between so much that has been sundered and alienated in various manifestations of Cartesianism: mind and body, beliefs and reasons, knower and known, objective and subjective, figurative and literal, and countless other topics you will find in the subject index I have distributed in the handout and never think about in the same way again ... if you understand this book.

As I continue this introduction to Poteat's PM I shall use a somewhat personal and auto biographical approach because I think that will be the most helpful to you. This approach is, also warranted by Poteat's opening words where he tells us the work is not the result of conventional scholarship: 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."

PM may be best understood as an extension of Poteat's teaching, so by telling you a bit about how and what he taught in the years in which it was in the womb, I can help you know what is there now that he has birthed it out.

Let me first take you back to the opening class of CC-16 in the fall of 1967, or I recently ran across the notebook from that course.

I wrote down that Poteat said that he was going to perform on us a conceptual wrecking job through a Socratic dialogue focusing on issues arising from 4 authors: Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Skinner.

We were to read a work by each, discuss each book in class, and write papers each week of 300 words,  $\pm 2$  and a final paper of 1000 words,  $\pm 5$ . The papers were not to be commentaries but were to be "wrestling matches with ideas inspired by the class discussion of the books." And in response to a student question about what research should be done for the papers he said quote anyone caught doing research in this course will be summarily shot!!!

It was easy enough for a group of seminarians to recognise that we wanted to part company at some point with Marx, Darwin, Freud, and Skinner. But Poteat, who could and would argue for the theories under discussion even more effectively than the theorists themselves, soon helped us grasp how difficult it would be, creatures

of modern sensibility that we were, to stake out some territory that was different from the various reductionisms we opposed, because of the extent to which we had bought into the perspectives we opposed, unwittingly, at deeper levels.

It was the reverse of the old story about the 2 Oxford Dons, on their daily walk, who observed two women in a furious dispute, yelling at one another from the top windows of apartment buildings on opposite sides of a narrow street. One wise Prof com mused: “They’ll never come to an agreement, will they?” The other quipped “Certainly not, they’re arguing from different premises.”

We found we were arguing from the same premises; that these four creatures of modernity, in spite of their many differences, were arguing from some similar assumptions, and that to struggle with these assumptions was no simple feat in view of our sharing in the same assumptions. Lesson one in the ubiquity of Cartesianism.

Underneath our many differences there was a picture of how it all hangs together that we shared -the picture of cartesian logic that confused, confounded, undercut - not so much what we wanted to say and do as what we wanted to say in 2nd order accounts about what we wanted to say and do as we went around the world making promises, speaking, doing deeds, acting, knowing, worshipping, making moral judgments, or many of the other things that persons do in spite of Cartesian accounts that would reduce dissolve or explain them away.

Poteat’s brilliance as a teacher in a Socratic mode was overwhelming and was almost universally appreciated. Yet I began to feel, grasp, understand that behind this brilliant dialectic was a radical alternative to the particular misconceptions of Marx et al and he had found his way to what those creatures of modernity had in common and even more important how we might get beyond the dilemmas they posed.

Needless to say, that was not accomplished in one course - at least for someone so slow witted as I- but through a number of opportunities over nine year to participate in the colloquy mentioned earlier.

If we had time I would take you to other settings where Poteet developed and applied his cultural conceptual analysis to many areas of western culture. We can find motifs carved out of and built upon these earlier explorations of art, music,

literature, religious art, philosophy throughout PM. We'd want to probe his work on religious language, his lectures on "Music Eroticism and Madness," and his sound and light shows on incarnational categories in western art.

Even more important in the background of what Poteet calls this sustained critical colloquy with three generations of graduate students said among a half dozen or so canonical volumes is under his graduate seminars typically focused on one text from the Canon per semester and the text might be read at 10 pages per session. The authors to which he returned for paths out of the morass of modernity were Polanyi, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, and the OED.

Students would usually lead off, and Poteat would probe, and push, and pull until some sense had been made of the opening confusion. It was in one such seminar that *Polanyian Meditations* in this form begin to emerge, as described in the quotation in the handout which while I will not take time to read.<sup>1</sup>

Dissertation research and writing under Poteat's careful and caring scrutiny and assistance usually involved returning to the canon for more analysis and therapy. The contributions of Polanyi and the others were not so much studied as indwelled as grounds for treating the manifestations of the damage of Cartesianism in contemporary thought ranging from theology and philosophy to literature, political theory, sociology, and psychology. The methodology employed in many of those dissertations would be recognisable to you if you read Poteat's analysis and treatment of Hume and Kant, Skinner and Chomsky, Perelman and Ong,, and others in PM.

One final stop on this journey through some of the background of the work would be the more experimental seminar discussions held one evening a week in Poteat's living room. Participants often included persons beyond current graduate students.

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<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 1976, in the midst of a colloquy in my graduate seminar on *Personal Knowledge*, I interrupted to deliver an impromptu mini lecture on Polanyi's uses of the word "logic," a question to which I had not previously given explicit thought. To deflect the seminars attention from note taking in order that instead the expectant faces of its members might be allowed to work their maieutic magic upon my only half formed and emerging thought, I promised to commit to writing for future distribution what I felt I was about to say. A few days later I sat down to write the promised handout, beginning with a passage from page 160 of personal knowledge, supposing it would run to perhaps 5 legal size mimeograph sheets. Three months and 24,000 words later I had long since forgotten the handout and was well underway in the writing of PM.

In looking over my bookshelves I see from those seminars such theorists as Ricoeur, Piaget, George Steiner, Elizabeth Sewell, Joseph Church, Walker Percy, Irwin Strauss, Hans Jonas, and numerous other writings by the authors of the Canon. I hear echoes of these sessions throughout PM. And remember I was involved in this intensively for only 4-5 years of “some 30 years of this sustained critical colloquy with three generations of graduate students.”

My purpose in reviewing some of these has emphatically not been to wrap myself in some cloak of Apostolic authority, for neither Bill nor I would be comfortable with that. If you have read even the introduction you might be even more suspicious of a report from my time at Duke, for I began before his “orphanic dismemberment” and completed my studies before the beginning of PM in its present form.

I have chosen this approach as an introduction rather than attempting to explain what he is doing in PM in a way that you can understand because, if he is doing what he says he is doing, the latter cannot be done. My giving you an understanding of the book is impossible in that the book is designed to transform your understanding.

Directly explaining PM to you would be similar to a problem we discussed for weeks in CC 16: imagining how an Azande might understand a scientific explanation of a phenomenon understood in his cultural conceptual framework.

But I thought this background might help you appreciate what may not be apparent from the indices or from the way Poteet proceeds: that a life of inquiry of radical and far reaching scope feeds in 2:00 PM. And if this background tempts you in terms of territory you have explored or want to explore, give PM a try. I've made some suggestions for related readings in the handout.

For who among us as a scholar and teacher in religion and as a person living in the end of the old modern age is not concerned with the fundamental images, metaphors, analogies, and logic by which our culture represents our relation to nature, to our bodies, to the material world, to time in history, to acts of reflection, to decisions, to our mind bodily knowing, being, doing, speaking that Poteet so radically and brilliantly illuminates as he offers us his life work.



# OTTAWA UNIVERSITY KANSAS CITY

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April 20, 1988

Dear Bill

Last fall, in a moment of atypical "professional " activity, I agreed to Richard Gelwick's invitation to participate in a panel on Polanyian Meditations at the Central States Regional Meeting of the AAR. As the date approached, my assignment turned out to be to "introduce" (gasp) PM in 15 minutes.

The meeting was last weekend and I have enclosed a copy of what I said. I ended up saying, of course, far less than you do in your "Prologue" and less, I think, that do Rutledge and Crunckleton in their reviews in the Polanyi Society periodical. But it is a kind of introduction for those unfamiliar with your work or with Polanyi, so I thought you might be interested.

The other panelists, Gelwick and a fellow named Phil Mullins, said my remarks were interesting and helpful as they continue to make sense of and make sense with PM. The opportunity to discuss your book with them was worth the trip. The turnout was not large enough to gauge how successful this kind of introduction might be for those completely unfamiliar with Polanyi or your work but several of those present raised good questions and expressed some interest after our discussion.

While driving back from Springfield I began to toy with re—casting this under a title of "Potat, Polanyi, Percy and More, Including 10 Reasons Why You Should (Should Not?) Read This Book." The More, of course, would be Dr. Tom, and I would draw out some analogies between his lapsometer's approach to analysis/therapy and your treatment of Cartesianism. That idea will probably be shortlived, so don't panic. But I do wonder how you feel about "cultural' conceptual analysis" as a partial description for what you do. I have some -thoughts about that that I would like to work through.

As the letterhead indicates, I am still with the same college.

Having recently been elevated to full professor of Religion and Philosophy, I teach very little of either. Unlike Binx Bolling I still occasionally read "fundamental works" but like Binx my calling and job seem to be extend a helping hand when I can. The adult students I get in general education courses are generally appreciative of my efforts but usually oriented to "practical and applied studies. They, for the most part, refuse to be bothered by second order accounts of much of anything beyond the level of Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning or Schumacher's "Good Work" or, with great effort on my part and much gnashing of teeth, something like Habits of the Heart or William May's The Physician's Covenant.

I've taken to teaching business ethics through a case studies approach, an alternative that I find preferable to the often sterile abstractions of much of the ethics literature. When it works it approaches a kind of discovery through stories; when it doesn't it seems less harmful than more conventional ethics .

On balance, my guess is I still have a better situation than do many who are teaching conventional undergraduates — that's certainly the ease when I compare my situation and students to those on our campus. .

Linda is still doing well, and the Center on Aging that she directs is thriving. Lisa, whose first birthday celebration photos include one of you at the Churchill's home, is now finishing her first year of high school. Will is a very active fourth grader. Both are good students and talented musicians and beyond that rather different from one another in all too conventional gender related interests .

I hope you are well and well into whatever projects your retirement has opened up for you. I'd love to hear what you are up to and "What Poteat is doing." In case you are backed up in correspondence, traveling, heavily involved in PM vol. II, or otherwise too occupied to respond to this epistle, I've enclosed a postcard with my new home address for you to let me know what you think of my introduction to your remarkable work. For the latter, and for all you did for me during those terrific years at Duke, I shall always remain deeply grateful.

Sincerely,

Gus Breytspraak, Ph. D.

WHP to WAB, April 19, 1988. Hand  
written on yellow sheets

Dear Gus:

Your letter with enclosures arrived - unplanned, of course - on the eve of my 69th birthday and are a present for which I would not have had the wit to ask. Many, many thanks.

A much-needed, gentle, spring rain falls on the front yard just at the horizons of my field of view. I still have my regular 2 1/2 mile jog to do. There is a lighter patch of sky to the west. If I put off the jog for another hour perhaps I won't get soaked.

Meanwhile, let me respond to your splendid letter.

First, let me congratulate you on your promotion to Full Professor. I have no doubt that your situation there at Ottawa as you describe it, is more congenial in almost every way than the more conventional positions now occupied by most academics - although the fruitful, happy unconventionality factor is certainly very high among Religion and Culture types from Duke. You contrast the more typical undergraduates on your campus with the older, more practical minded students, with whom you deal, finding the latter more interesting, probably more teachable. I know something about this. During my last five years I found each class of undergraduates less susceptible than the last to my kind of pedagogy until my very last group never came to have any sense whatsoever of what it is to take responsibility for what you think and say. My faculty colleagues, on the other hand, kept saying that their students were getting smarter and better each year.

The real crusher came with my final graduate seminar on in spring of '87. Even the graduate students had no interest except trying to find an answer to the question: What does Poteat want? in order to give it back to me. I believe they were genuinely deaf to my demand that they take intellectual responsibility for themselves. I found and find it frightening, and a kind of defeat, and was/am glad to be relieved of the

daily confrontation with this. The old devices which I employed to turn students around and which worked, though sometimes only at the eleventh hour, were now met with blank stares. I think the years that you remember so fondly were among the best for me, and for students to be at Duke in the graduate program.

I think your introduction of P.M. for the symposium is well-nigh perfect. First, the style relaxed, anecdotal, ironic - is the only one that will effect the outcome you desire - to induce people - not to read that notion is too thoroughly compromised by the Cartesian company it keeps - to plunge into the book as into some kind of strenuous dance by which you hope they will be caught up In order that they will get on with their life's work. People who have said that P.M. is a tour de force, a performance, have a sense of this; but in so far as this suggests something to be enjoyed in a somewhat detached manner, it may mislead. P.M. Is a book about a post-critical conception of a book which is an instance of itself. As I wrote, my rhetoric was designed to reach out of the page and grab the reader by the lapels and drag him into it.

The former colleague, whom you quote - "Bill finally wrote it all down" - is wrong. As you say, I didn't and couldn't. And this you effectively underscore by showing the continuity between the book and the teaching and the life - with all the wonderful anecdotal material from CC 16 etc..

Then, you make no attempt to present any Poteatean ideas drawn from P.M. I suppose there are some such, but as you obviously sense, attention to these would be the worst possible way to introduce someone to the point of P.M. and, yes, I think cultural conceptual analysis is what we are doing.

The relaxed and anecdotal style, too, engages your reader personally, before his critical superego has had a chance to lay down the strict terms on which he will allow himself to have to do with this non-book. Cartesianism in this culture is like neurosis: it is deeply embedded; it is the way in which Western man has made sense of his existence - as the neurotic has with his neurosis. Both the neurotic, and the

Cartesian have therefore to be approached, indirectly, so you do not arouse his defenses.

Finally, as to the style. It is confessional. You give your hearers a sense of what it was like for you actually to be engaged in cultural conceptual analysis and how it formed your life. An auditor is easily drawn by this to enter this intellectual experience for himself. You are right to see that the canonical works were not to be the subjects of research, therefore, the 'findings' were not more light on the subject of say 'the immediate stages of the musical erotic"; but rather they were the instruments of research. From your typescript it is easy to visualize you before the symposiasts introducing P.M. to them in an easy conversational tone.

Retirement has, so far, been totally lacking in trauma. As you know, I lived a life of complete self-indulgence for 40 years. Whatever novelties were to come from some kind of end to this were bound not to be those encountered by people who have spent themselves in a life of honest work.

I did wonder what would take the place of going to meet classes every day, getting the stimulus that these always provided. The stimulus I seem not to have required. What now takes the place of classes is my regular, four-hour writing stint in the morning, five days a week.

I began almost by accident, writing my "philosophical investigations" in a leather-bound book with blank pages – the gift of a friend. As you will see, from the enclosed xeroxed pages, it is kind of a cross between Wittgenstein's Investigations and P.M. This was all begun when, with P.M. through the press and duly published, I read the book kind of at a sitting and was astonished at how very radical it was. I realized that absolutely everything had to be rethought in its light. And that is what these 'Philosophical Investigations' are a daily report upon – rethinking, everything topic by topic.

I was bowled over by the "news" that Lisa is finishing her first year in high school. Not possible. I must've aged!

Glad to learn that Linda's show goes along well, and that you are enjoying yourself and feeling useful in your position. Incidentally, I think your "Poteat, Polanyi, Percy and More" idea has possibilities. Sounds like a Washington law firm.

My wife, Pat Lewis, who you may well remember - well behind you in the graduate program - has just taken a new position as Associate Vice Chancellor for Research at UNC Chapel Hill after paying her dues in state government in Raleigh. She will have an adjunct appointment in Religious Studies. She's been at this a little more than three months and is beginning to invent the job.

All the best,  
Bill

PS. did you invent the "distinguished philosopher" who read P.M. and wept?

PPS. I discovered that there are allusions in the (enclosed) material from 'Philosophical Investigations' that would mean little to you without an essay I wrote for a festschrift "For Whom Is the Real Existence of Values a Problem or an Attempt to Show that the Obvious is Plausible." I'll ask Wanda to run it through the computer and will send you a copy.