

# Poteat and the Space of Appearances

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The Primacy of Persons: The Legacy of William H. Poteat

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There is, in the desert where California borders on Arizona, a fabricated town called Felicity that its architects identify as “the center of the world.”<sup>1</sup> It has two residents, Jacques-Andre Istel and Felicia Lee Istel, and a quantity of newly built pyramids and granite slabs on which the Istels are in the process of having carved the history of the world as they wish to tell it. They are, in their odd way, correct, of course. Felicity (**Latitude:** 32.7503 , **Longitude:** 114.7653) is the center of the world for the Istels, the place they mindbodily stand, and the history of the world that they are inscribing on their granite slabs is the history of the world that they, in their odd adventure and “absurdist joke,” both retrotend and protend. In the isolation of the desert, they can pretty much invent time and place to their own specifications.

Poteat’s lesson, taught hundreds of times over, was that every “I” establishes the center of the world. That is to say, the mind-body that owns itself when I say “I” establishes the anchoring “whence” of our living—the center that establishes the “here,” “this,” and “now” from which and to which I orient my apprehension of the vast array of otherness and the sequence of change. It is the platform from which I launch all of my projects. This is what Poteat meant in writing, “For myself, I am not *in* the world as Jones is in the world” (“I Will Die,” 186). His essays analyzing “I” remain, to my mind, his most forceful work, and they present simply and lucidly the impenetrable (often unadmitted) mystery at the core of all philosophies of the subject:

“When I use ‘I’ of myself, something is being named which is *for me* not just the spatiotemporal speaker or behavior from whom the noise ‘I’ has come. If you ask me what it is that is named, hoping to have an answer given in reports of behavior alone, then of course I can’t say. You are

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<sup>1</sup> I first heard about this from my brother who stopped there this past spring on a cross-country drive, but for a journalist’s report, see Jon Mooallem, “A Journey to the Center of the World,” *New York Times Magazine* (Voyages Issue), February 19, 2014.

asking a question that on your terms, as I have been trying to show, is impossible to answer. If you do not ask what it is that is named *in these terms*, then my answer is quite simple: myself!" ["I Will Die," 187]

Only by a feat of considerable abstraction do I come to imagine myself as one instance, one entity, that occupies a place in a landscape alongside many unprepossessing others, none occupying a privileged or orienting point of view. So my purpose here is to start a thread of conversation about Poteat's contribution to the philosophy of the subject, offering some remarks on three twentieth-century figures who also advanced our thinking about selves and subjects and with whose work Poteat was familiar: Hannah Arendt, Gabriel Marcel, and H. Richard Niebuhr. I have chosen these because they happen to be among my current interests. I do recognize that it would probably have been more respectable to choose Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur as conversation partners since these three authors all made it into the recent (2005) benchmark volume *Self and Subjectivity*. In the introduction to that collection, Kim Atkins insists on "the continued relevance of concepts of self and subjectivity," notwithstanding the well-known "various challenges to the 'philosophy of the subject' posed by reductionist neuroscience and postmodern critique."<sup>2</sup> The philosophy of the subject, into which I believe that a good deal of Poteat's work can be properly integrated, is itself a distinctively modern field of inquiry. For that reason, I think the rubric of this session—"Poteat's Reading of/Interpretation of/Reliance on Modernity's Critics"—is misleading. The appendix to this paper gives my reasons for rejecting "critics of modernity" as an appropriate descriptor for Poteat and the figures he engaged in his classes.

## 1. ,Hannah Arendt: "Who are you?"

I have accented the "space of appearances" in my title because it captures for me something essential about Poteat's graduate classes and, less dramatically, his undergraduate classes as well. In the "widest sense," the space of appearances is "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance [as persons] explicitly."<sup>3</sup> "Appearing" is accomplished by speech and action, which constitute a third form of activity that is not reducible to

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<sup>2</sup> Kim Atkins, ed., *Self and Subjectivity*, Blackwell Readings in Continental Philosophy (Malden, Mass., and Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198–99.

labor or work as she defines them. “Appearing” in this communal space is a matter of self-disclosure, and the “agonal spirit” is “the passionate drive to show one’s self in measuring up against others” (194). The space of appearances, closely aligned to the public realm, is a forum, common to all, in which by speech and action some may come to prominence, but it is also, much more importantly, the space in which what we value is “saved from destruction by time” (57). One passage is particularly illuminating:

“the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one’s own position with its attending aspects and perspectives. The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt in the public realm; but this family ‘world’ can never replace the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators. Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” [57]

The space of appearances corresponds, as this passage makes vividly clear, to the human condition of plurality (where plurality is conceived so radically as to throw into doubt any conception of “common human nature,” the reality of which she denies). Under conditions of plurality, “appearance” is not the contrary of the real: “appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality” (50). The sharing and multiplying of the same perspective in mass society represents a destruction of the common world of the agora. In the absence of a genuine space of appearances, we “are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of [our] own singular experience” (58).

Thus for Poteat, Arendt provided a kind of shield against the privatization, philosophical idealism, relativism, and subjectivism that are the occupational hazard of philosophies of the self. But in terms of Poteat’s own

account of personal identity and the nature of the subject, Arendt's distinction between the "who" and the "what" of any given individual was important. Any human being is an observable, describable "what"—a continuing physical locus, available to the senses of other and therefore traceable and relatively stable, though mobile and capable of development. In addition to physical characteristics, the "what" includes the constellation of the individual's "qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings" (179). While the "what" of Diane Yeager is available to the observer without any action on my part, "who" I am can be disclosed only in action (construed as setting in motion new beginnings) and speech. By such action and speech, I reveal my "unique personal identity" (179).

Curiously, and paradoxically, Arendt argues that 'who' a person is plain to others, although it remains unknown to the agent. We cannot reliably say "who" we are, yet we carry our essential identity with us, like the Greek *daimōn*, looking over our shoulder, so to speak. Thus "hidden from the person himself," the 'who' nevertheless "appears . . . clearly and unmistakably to others" (179). Arendt's image of the *daimōn* coordinated well, I think, with Poteat's own distinction between the systematically elusive active, speaking, sense-making "I," and the substantive "self" that the agent can describe and which the agent to some considerable extent invents. Only someone else can tell the story of the unique identity-in-action that I reveal, and that essence cannot be known and told until the full life arc of my life has been completed. Arendt's emphasis on narrative and story here was intriguing to Poteat and coalesced, in his mind at least, with his own interest in story and myth. To the puzzlement of the undergraduates, he frequently adverted to the Isak Dinesen line that Arendt used as an epigraph for the section on "Action": "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them."<sup>4</sup>

Oddly, I do not remember Poteat exploring in great depth what Arendt was doing in her development of *action* in its importance in the construction of a layer of social and institutional reality that constitutes "world," as distinct from "earth."<sup>5</sup> He concentrated mainly on her remarks on the importance of speech,

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<sup>4</sup> See also William H. Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Poteat used *The Human Condition* routinely in undergraduate classes, several of which I sat in on and at least for one of which I served as his grader (and was reprimanded for doing too much, at the expense of my own studies). During the time I was at Duke, he did not use *The Human Condition* in a graduate class.

which she does certainly associate very closely with action. Poteat, however, was interested, as I recall, with speech as means of appearance or self-disclosure rather than speech as one of the actions by which our species builds the organized, institutional world (the world of laws and practices, customs and expectations, processes and exchanges) into which every newcomer is welcomed (or, more properly, “thrown”). If I am right about this, I would take this to be quite significant. In critical engagement with our abstractly speculative European philosophical heritage, one path forward goes by way of the recovery or rehabilitation of the body, which is the path that Poteat increasingly took. Feminist philosophers and religious thinkers have also traveled this path; given that Poteat from time to time characterized himself as a feminist, it is a puzzle that he exhibited very little interest in this body of work. The other path goes by way of elevating act over thought, a maneuver which is intrinsically subversive of any segmentation of agents into ‘body parts’ and ‘mind parts’—and fatal to the privileging of thought, reason, and logical abstractions over the temporal unfolding of interactive agency, communal or material constraints, and the play of power.<sup>6</sup> The path to the rehabilitation of the body remains, generally, individual and lends itself to preoccupation with the immediacy of intuition. Walter Mead’s article “William Poteat’s Anthropology” summarizes Poteat’s “mediations” in a way that brings out very clearly the primacy of “our pre-reflective intimations” of meaning and coherence.<sup>7</sup>

The point I am making here is a matter of emphasis and nuance rather than sharp contrast. In his preoccupation with the active power of speech, Poteat’s work can be calibrated with Arendt’s. In her detailed remarks on earthliness (and our contemporary alienation from our “condition” and our fantasies of “conquering” nature), Arendt’s work coheres with the Poteatean theme of the significance of embodiment. My point is that Arendt’s the focus on actors acting in a public realm is necessarily more social and ethical than the Zorba-like celebration of the embodied subject which seems to have prevailed more and more decisively in the trajectory of Poteat’s work. As Arendt makes so clear, one *acts* into a social web, an inextricably tangled plurality. Every action has consequences—planned and unplanned—and every action is both

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<sup>6</sup> For Marcel’s commitment to “the primacy of action” (and its relationship to his advocacy of “creative fidelity”), see, for example, Gabriel Marcel, “An Essay in Autobiography,” in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans by Manya Harari (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1956), 126–28.

<sup>7</sup> Walter B. Mead, “William Poteat’s Anthropology: ‘Mindbody in the World,’” *Tradition and Discovery* 21.1 (1994–1995): 42.

imputable and irrevocable; the *daimōn* who others see is the author of deeds. In various texts—"I Will Die," for example—Poteat actively resists identifying the "I" with the accumulation of the agent's acts. In that particular essay, he voices three reasons for that resistance. First, "acts" is "a question-begging term" because it facilitates the slippage of mind by which we elide agents altogether and leave ourselves with a de-person-alized, detached collection of discrete, unauthored, and thus accidental objects or events. Second, any attempt to represent agency through catalogues and reports of observed behaviors will necessarily be a reductive account of agency.<sup>8</sup> Third, relations and bonds between persons ("love, fellowship, responsibility, forgiveness, freedom"<sup>9</sup>) cannot be fully apprehended or analyzed in terms of behavior in space and time. But to treat acts as a trail of observable behaviors is itself a reductive treatment of action and produces an understanding of "act" that is quite different from that of Arendt, for whom "act" is the movement of introducing something new into the realm of human affairs.

In *Recovering the Ground*, Poteat representation of Arendt is revealing. He reduces action to speech, and on 129, he associates "world" with work.<sup>10</sup> Having done this, he therefore concludes that the "world" into which we come at birth is the residue of work rather than being both the grand constellation of durable goods produced by work *and*, more importantly, the sedimentation of action. This leads him to say, misleadingly, "as Arendt is at pains to show, of all human activities speech is the most futile."<sup>11</sup> Arendt does say that "viewed . . . in their worldliness, action, speech, and thought . . . are as futile as life itself."<sup>12</sup> What she means here is that speech, unlike work, does not produce durable material artefacts that will persist in the environment, like Clorox bottles, whether human beings notice them or not—and until they are actively dismantled. Her point is that speech and action require human recognition and interaction in order to attain any level of reality: speech and deed, if they are not to be futile, must be received, "must first be seen, heard, and remembered" (95). However,

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<sup>8</sup> William H. Poteat, "I Will Die': An Analysis," in *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays by William H. Poteat*, ed. with an introduction by James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 182.

<sup>9</sup> Poteat, "I Will Die," 191.

<sup>10</sup> William H. Poteat, *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 128-130.

<sup>11</sup> Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95.

very nearly all of our speaking and all of our acting does, in fact, fall into the web of relationships. Speech, then, is hardly futile—our deeds and their consequences reach in an endless chain of effects to the end of time: “action [together with speech] has no end” (233). This, of course, then creates almost insuperable problems of anxiety and guilt, for which the power to promise and the power to forgive are, in Arendt’s view, the only available remedies.

My comparison of Poteat and Arendt is, obviously, too brief, and I have no doubt that further analysis of Poteat’s treatment of speech in relation to action would be valuable both in understanding his development and in placing him in the landscape of philosophical reflection. It is important to remember that he did not have to remain a philosopher. Many who are as discontented with philosophical discussions as he was simply walk away from the field. He himself, however, never stopped engaging philosophically with philosophy. For that reason it seems to me both legitimate and imperative to try to locate him in the field he loved to hate.

Before I leave this discussion of Arendt, I want to at least draw attention to her reflections, spanning the greater part of her career, on the relationship of philosophy and politics (*vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*). In the course of her own struggle to arrive at a satisfactory analysis of their differences and interplay, Arendt distinguishes two approaches to philosophical inquiry.<sup>13</sup> One might construe the work of the philosopher to be that of uncovering, by dint of solitary thinking, a true grasp of the subject investigated—an invincible position by which to put an end to debate. She associates this approach, essentially a quest for absolute truth, with Plato and the early Heidegger, and she regards it as dangerous to politics because it is designed to put an end to plurality of opinion and because it forecloses compromise. On the other hand, one might much more modestly construe the work of the philosopher to be the fostering of a perpetual questioning conversation about problems and issues of common interest; on this model, truth is not something that philosophers should expect or be expected to supply. This view she associates with Socrates, Jaspers, and the late Heidegger, and she believes that this philosophical stance is more compatible with politics as expressive of dynamic human world-creating action within the framework of the human condition of earthliness, plurality, natality, and mortality.

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<sup>13</sup> For a trenchant and remarkably helpful summary of the evolution of Arendt’s thinking on this subject through multiple texts and over many years, see Margaret Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt’s Reflections on Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57.1 (Spring 1990): 135–65.

I bring this up for two reasons. (1) I think it helps us grasp something of the difference between Poteat the teacher and Poteat the author, at the same time that (2) it helps us appreciate how, in both cases, he was deploying the contributions of the authors who formed his traveling companions. In both his teaching and his writing, he was more interested in the authors' diagnosis of the problems than he was in their solutions (with the possible exception of Polanyi). If one is going to do philosophy "therapeutically," then one has to begin with a diagnosis. However, his teaching and his writing differ in that his classes (at least when I was at Duke in the early 1970s) were much more oriented toward restless self-critical questioning. His pedagogical approach, at both the graduate and undergraduate level, was always simply: 'This is a very difficult and important argument, worth an entire term's attention. Let us simply try to understand what this author is trying to tell us.' He did, of course, license his students to try to identify weaknesses in the arguments examined, and this was part of the profoundly empowering effect of his teaching. This shared, communicative project of understanding is properly understood along the lines of Arendt's representation of the space of appearances. In guiding the discussions he aimed either (*a*) to illuminate the text and display its importance<sup>14</sup> or (*b*) through the discussion to use the students' puzzlement or misinterpretation as an occasion for Poteat's own very skillful laying bare of the assumptions, expectations, and convictions we brought to our activity of engagement. Sometimes he would then launch upon a determined effort to expose those presuppositions as distorted, but just as often (as I remember it) he was content to let the commitments stand, satisfied simply with having succeeded in making some part of the invisible visible.

In marked contrast, Poteat's books, with the possible exception of the collected essays, are directed to us as the voice of truth. These narratives are, to be sure, self-mocking, self-revising, sly, witty, and wry, but they are, for all of that, the pronouncements of an oracle.

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<sup>14</sup> For a "philological" approach to reading (and, by extension, teaching), see: George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 6 and throughout. Steiner objects to "the dominance of the secondary and the parasitic" (7), observes that "the action of meaning . . . is performance" and "interpretation is understanding in action" (8), calls upon the reader/student to "[invest] his own being in the process of interpretation" (8), and characterizes "criticism and self-criticism" as the activity of making "the past text a present presence" (13). For Steiner, our relationship to the texts we read has a distinctly moral dimension: "Interpretative response under pressure of enactment I shall . . . call answerability. The authentic experience of understanding, when we are spoken to by another human being or by a poem, is one of responding responsibility" (8). The reader is called "into creative responsibility" (15). This, it seems to me, is what it was like to participate in one of Poteat's seminars.

## 2. Gabriel Marcel: Testimony

The phenomenon of testimony, and the related notion of bearing witness, has received increasing attention in recent philosophy, and the broad notion of testimony or witness was consistently important to Poteat's accounts of both the nature of personhood and the securing of knowledge claims. In a way, testimony might be said to provide one of the bridge concepts linking his ontological and epistemological concerns. If that goes too far, we can still certainly say that since he never conceived language as essentially propositional (or essentially anything), he concerned himself with its performative and practical dimensions. Contemporary literature on the subject has emerged as part of the broad resistance to what we might call the deracinate strand in accounts of both knowing and speaking. These rich and interesting explorations of testimony can be gathered into five clusters. These approaches bleed into one another, so the groupings would be better visualized as a Venn diagram than as a typology (figure 1).

1. *Testimony and verification.* Much of the philosophical interest in testimony grows out of the epistemological problem of justifying belief in what people say. The model, here, is testimony in court, and the issue is credibility. Under what circumstances we are justified in accepting as true what someone tells us is true, when we ourselves have no first-hand knowledge of the subject or event? The philosopher's question is, "Why should I believe you?" The philosophical task is to articulate as definitely as possible the line between the occasions when believing the testimony is justified and the occasions when believing the testimony is not justified.
2. *Testimony and illocutionary force.* This body of literature is much smaller than the first cluster and related to it in that the concern is still epistemological. For three reasons, this cluster resonates more with Poteat's own concerns: (a) these writers are more skeptical concerning any notion of objective truth; (b) they approach testimony with the analytical tools of ordinary language analysis, and (c) they attend explicitly to intersubjectivity.
3. *Testimony and "owned" experience.* The reflective philosopher Gabriel Marcel introduces testimony in the context of the distinction, which anchors so much of his work, between problems and mysteries (see

table 1).<sup>15</sup> Most of what we reference in our speech belongs to the domain of shared natural and social reality, equally open to investigation by all participants. But sometimes people undertake to speak about personal experiences that are somehow outside that domain of shared investigation, perhaps because they are internal states (tension, fatigue, pain, emotions such as fear, gratitude, or joy) or involve access to features of reality that are not open to investigation by all (nightmares, religious experiences, substance-induced distortions of perception, love, friendship, and other commitments). Here testimony is the communication of idiosyncratic knowledge. We call it testimony because, in principle, it cannot be checked by others. Not surprisingly, this use of “testimony” is more common among religiously oriented thinkers than philosophical epistemologists.

4. *Testimony and memory.* Disconnected from epistemological concerns, the literature on violence, genocide, and other atrocities, testimony figures prominently. We should begin by noticing that all reports of past events fall into the category of interpretation and cannot be verified in the same sense that we might seek to verify reports about present events, present arrangements, or permanent realities. So there is a sense in which verbalized memory is always and necessarily testimony. For this reason, any telling of the past (and this includes all political, national, ethnic, and religious traditions) is always selective and is usually subject to revision or argument. In that sense, testimony concerning the past is rather like testimony concerning interior states or unobservable

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<sup>15</sup> Poteat does not often mention Marcel in his written work, but he commends Marcel’s grasp of the systematically elusive character of “this bedrock, irreducible logico-ontological reality” of the sentient, oriented acting and knowing subject. Poteat notes, “because this reality is itself the very radix of knowing-being or of being-knowing, it is metaproblematic, to use Marcel’s coinage: that is, the ground of reflection is finally opaque to reflection.” See, William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985), 15. Concerning Marcel’s contrast between problems and mysteries, Poteat seems to have been of two minds. In “Some Polanyian Meditations” in *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture*, he seems endorse it, remarking on “striking parallels between Polanyi’s tacit-explicit, proximal-distal dichotomies and Marcel’s problem-mystery dichotomy” (48 n.5). However, in “Reflections on Walker Percy’s Theory of Language” in that same volume, he characterizes Marcel’s contrast as too much of a concession to binary or dualistic thinking. Percy’s emphasis on “*my* act of speaking” as a feat of integration provides a valuable “model upon which to devise a new theory of man,” one that “is heuristically more fecund and closer to our concrete being than models based upon oppositions and juxtapositions such as Buber’s I-Thou versus I-It, Sartre’s *en-soi* versus *pour-soi*, Marcel’s problem versus mystery, or Heidegger’s *Sein, das Seindes, Dasein*” (253–54).

experiences. Yet out of the holocaust (and other similar experiences of trauma and horror) there has emerged a still more specific connection of testimony and memory. Just by the fact of surviving, those who were not killed become witnesses to the unsharable and even unspeakable. In this context, particular poignancy is given to the notion of witness or testimony because with each passing year fewer remain who can bear witness—that is, fewer remain who were participants in the events, who carry the actual imprint of the events on their bodies and the actual experiences seared into their memories. They bear before the community the mark of the past uniquely. Their very existence is a reproach as well as a triumph.

5. *Testimony/witness in practice (witnessing presence)*. This does not actually turn up much in explicit treatments of testimony, but one can find it implicitly worked out in literary and cinematic stories from *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to *Tender Mercies*. In this usage, testimony stands over against language and is used to mark the divergence between the convictions, commitments, and suppositions that people report or formulate propositionally, and the convictions, commitments, and suppositions out of which they actually organize their interactions and their life ways. So William James famously suggested that if we want to know what people really believe, we should not listen to what they say but rather observe what they do.

The clusters that are of most interest in relation to Poteat's work are 2 and 5. To set his work in the landscape of these other investigations, I am going to look at just two texts: (1) "Testimony, Illocution, and the Second Person" by Richard Moran, provides a useful introduction to the second approach.<sup>16</sup> As his title suggests, Moran draws explicitly on the work of J. L. Austin, which gives Moran and Poteat a common ancestor. (2) Gabriel Marcel's essay inaptly titled essay "Testimony and Existentialism" has resonance with the work of Poteat along several axes.<sup>17</sup> Marcel exemplifies the third approach to testimony, though his treatment of the subject shades into both the fourth and fifth. I might have looked at Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, or Ricoeur in this section, but I have chosen Marcel because I am increasingly convinced that Poteat belongs to the tradition of French reflective philosophy that Marcel represents.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Moran, "Testimony, Illocution, and the Second Person," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume lxxxvii* (The Aristotelian Society, 2013), 115–35. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8349.2013.00222.x

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel Marcel, "Testimony and Existentialism," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. by Manya Harari (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1956), 91–103. The essay was written in 1946.

## 2.1 Richard Moran: Testimony and illocutionary force

Moran's reference in his title to "the second person" invokes "recent discussions of what is called 'correlative', 'bipolar' normativity" which have "emphasized the dimension of moral and legal obligations that relates specific individuals to each other in pairs such as promisor and promisee or debtor and creditor" (115). Stephen Darwall captured this under the rubric of "the second-person standpoint,"<sup>18</sup> or, as Moran typically characterizes it, 'the idea of the 'second-personal'" (Moran, 120). Whereas other theorists of the second-personal have apparently tended to study this bi-polar, relational normativity in the domain of practical reason (acts of promising, contracting, complaining, extending or claiming rights, extending or claiming recognition, lending resources and assuming debt), Moran wishes to extend its applicability to the domain of speculative reason (theoretical reason-giving) as well.<sup>19</sup> In their illocutionary force, he considers the speech acts of asserting that P is the case, claiming P (or claiming that P is true), or telling someone what is so to be intersubjective rather than observational, normative (involving accountability and the willing assumption of responsibility) rather than neutral, and committed rather than detached. Thus, the illocutionary act that is inseparable from genuine assertion, claiming, or telling someone that P is the case is the act of testifying. He argues that

"speech acts such as claiming and telling, and the intersubjective relations that such acts involve, are the primary way that truths are communicated in ordinary human verbal discourse. It is in this way, then, the act of testimony provides a way of conveying a reason for belief that is essentially different from directing someone to some evidence that P, for nothing becomes evidence for P in virtue of someone's attitude toward it, or in virtue of his presenting [it] to another person as evidence." [117]

No less than to promise, to claim that P [or to claim that P is true] is an enactment of the speaker's commitment and an assumption of responsibility.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> He does concede a very important difference. In relation to the domain of practical reason, the speaking brings about a state of affairs that did not pre-exist the speaking; in the domain of speculative reason, the matter that is communicated with the force of testimony is, if true at all, considered by both speaker and hearer to pre-exist the communication.

This disclosure of commitment on the part of the speaker provides an additional reason, over and above any relevant factors the speaker may cite or any expertise the speaker may catalogue, for the hearer to believe that P [is true]. The listener may, of course, remain unpersuaded, and this, according to Moran, is actually an expression of the freedom of the other to which the speaker appeals and to which the speaker, too, binds herself in distinctive ways insofar as she grants the authority of assessment to her hearers. This granting to the hearer the authority to assess is argued by Moran to be intrinsic to the illocutionary act. But, as Moran properly points out, once we take up the question of audience reaction, we have moved from the illocutionary act to the quite different perlocutionary effects of that act, and a consideration of the perlocutionary effects would move us back into the sorts of consideration so richly explored in the literature of the first cluster.

My point is that in 2013 a Harvard philosopher felt that he was moving the conversation forward by making an argument that both Poterat and Polanyi made much earlier, but to relatively little philosophical effect. I recall with what vivid energy Poterat contended in his seminars that the testimony of the speaker is finally the best we have in the way of a guarantee of the truth of any propositional provision of information—not perhaps what we want, but the most we can get. Although we have been habituated to think that the facts themselves—self-evident, rationally collated, and impersonally regarded and assessed—provide the guarantee, we must give that up. Once we grasp that all “facts” require some level of interpretation and once we accept reality as inexhaustible (which makes it always possible that some yet unknown factor will emerge to undo our careful noetic constructions of “the way things are”), we are thrown into a sea of partial, perspectival, and fallible interpretations. So when an expert says, “To the best of my knowledge. . . .” and other similarly knowledgeable authorities concur, we recognize that assurance or testimony of experts as about the best we can get in the way of assurance. When testimony is understood in this way, a primary issue of concern is the noetic depth, the reliability, and the trustworthiness of the one who offers and expects us to believe and act upon her testimony. This I take to be Polanyi’s dominant use of the notion as well.

## 2.2 Marcel

Marcel’s work was not the subject of any of Poterat’s courses while I was at Duke, and I do not recall anyone in my cohort working on Marcel. Yet it is useful to focus here on Marcel as part of a project of beginning to explore the

depth of Poteat's debt to the distinctively French tradition of reflective philosophy, which is described by Marcel as "the deepening of metaphysical knowledge . . . [by means of] the steps whereby experience, instead of evolving technics, turns inwards towards the realization of itself."<sup>20</sup>

A careful examination of Marcel's important essay "The Ego in Its Relations to Others" discloses strong similarities to the work (or at least the teaching) of Poteat in the analysis of the meaning of "person" (which Marcel opposes to "individual") and in the attack on "the mirages of abstraction."<sup>21</sup> Both men emphasize the concrete, particular, and temporal—and in that connection, both argue for the importance of philosophical attention to the phenomena of music and art (with Marcel emphasizing drama while Poteat emphasizes the visual arts). Marcel, like Poteat, explores the meaning of "I." (It is worth noticing, however, that the "I" described by Marcel seems distinctively more intersubjective than the "I" described by Poteat.) Both juxtapose the activities of thinking, formulating, and judging against the activities of discovering, exploring, and imagining. And at least partly out of that juxtaposition, Marcel, like Poteat, delivers himself of scathing criticism of the French educational system. It is, he remarks caustically, "the desert universe in which I was expected to survive." The course of study offered "hardly anything . . . that could touch our sensibility or fulfill our most pressing inward needs." It was altogether "abstract and inhumane."<sup>22</sup>

When Marcel turns his attention to the matter of testimony, he does not invoke testimony as a guarantee for the propositional content of an utterance, but as a truthful expression of what eludes propositional statement—an alternative form of truth either alongside propositional truth or replacing propositional truth. Unlike Moran, he does not try to install the intersubjective in the domain of the observational. Table 1 is developed from the essay "Testimony and Existentialism." The distinction between problems and mysteries, which at the noetic level is the distinction between observation and testimony, is fundamental to much of Marcel's philosophy. Perhaps the most important contrast captured in the table is that subject positions cannot be interchanged or substituted when testimony is involved. This is a marked

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<sup>20</sup> Marcel, "An Essay in Autobiography," 128.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Marcel, "The Ego and Its Relationship to Others," in *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. by Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 22, see esp. 15–16.

<sup>22</sup> Marcel, "An Essay in Autobiography," 112–14. See also, "The Ego and its Relationship to Others," 12–13.

departure from a long tradition of taking for granted “the substitutability of subject positions.” Testimony arises out of mode of belonging to the world rather than “having” or “controlling” it.

Admittedly, on first glance, this appears to be an elaborate dualistic distinction between two kinds of knowledge corresponding roughly to scientific, empirical, or factual knowledge, on the one hand, and moral and religious knowledge, on the other. In addition, there is little room to doubt that Marcel’s notion of mystery is invoked in his own protest against the inadequacy of the positivist prejudice that “real” can only mean either (1) that which the senses register in the present moment or (2) that which reason can simplify or refine (abstract) into language of maximal generality and minimal resonance (modeled, of course, by mathematics). Marcel also speaks, in his “Essay in Autobiography,” of “knowledge in its capacity to transcend objectivity” and of the reflective effort to get at “subjects as such—that is to say, . . . their reality as subjects” (107). All that notwithstanding, Marcel’s distinction is *not* between two kinds of subject matter or two kinds of knowledge, but between two sorts of “metaphysical attitudes.” This is very much like Martin Buber’s contrast of *I–It* and *I–Thou* or H. Richard Niebuhr’s contrast of internal and external history. These elements are not features of experience but modes of engagement with it. Testimony, according to Marcel, is an affirmation of the subject who testifies as well as a disclosure of what she testifies to. The onlooker attitude is a self-erasing stance. Marcel’s contrast also involves the distinction between what belongs to our established (sedimented) and shared reality and what belongs to domains of reality that are *in-the-making* or are so concretely particular as to elude “common knowledge”—a distinction that is surely neither naïve or indefensible.

In addition, though, for Marcel, testimony, the fact that we are witnesses, expresses our “belonging to the world.” Here his treatment becomes a feature of his essentially apophatic theology. Testimony can never take place in isolation. Before whom do we ultimately witness? Before a transcendence so complete that we cannot even discern its visage. To what do we witness? Well, certainly not just to rainbows and newborn babes (to borrow a phrase from Tom Stoppard). It is only, he suggests, “because there is a darkness, an eclipse, that there can be testimony—attestation.” Testimony begins after disappearance, leaving us to be guided by that “which is no longer visible to us directly.” This is the language of revealed knowledge of the unobservable and seems to link testimony to revealed, received truth that arises from non-observable sources, one of the most important of which is memory. He writes, “testimony refers to

something which has been *received*. If I have myself taken part in an event, I can only certify, I cannot bear witness.”<sup>23</sup> Receptivity is not however passive; to receive testimony is not to sit there like a jar passively waiting to have someone else to pour something into it. The proper analogy for receptivity is hospitality. Like a host receiving guests, the recipient of testimony participates actively in a transaction of welcoming and thus offers “a communication of oneself” (99).]

Finally, for Marcel testimony is a practice by means of which communities keep alive dimensions of experience that it is possible (both individually and collectively) to deny or forget.

Although we can establish that Poteat read and appreciated Marcel’s work, derivation on the specific subject of testimony remains speculative. Poteat did repeatedly draw attention to the fact that if philosophers really believed the things they say, they could not live the way they do—or conversely, if their philosophizing were to take true account of the features of their ordinary concrete ways of going about daily living, they would have to philosophize quite differently. Their “witnessing presence” was, in his view, the strongest possible argument against the truth of their claims. This was, of course, also an approach that he used with his graduate students, catching us again and again in our spinning and spouting of theoretical abstractions about our world and ourselves that we thought were true but could not withstand simple scrutiny in light of our everyday conduct. Bruce Haddox provided us, at the conference, with a funny, touching, and revealing instance when he recounted trotting out his refined, book-learned, rational analysis of the nature of the self in response to Poteat’s pointed question: “Haddox, who are you?” An analysis to which Poteat listened patiently only to respond, “Haddox, [pause] is that really who you are?”

“Testimony,” “attestation,” and “witness” do not appear in the indexes of any of Poteat’s books, but the theme is there under the cover of his exploration of the speaking subject. In “Reflections on Walker Percy’s Theory of Language,” for example, he writes, “In *my* act of speaking (and this must always be articulated in the first-person singular), in my act of laying claim to the tokens in our mutual native language to *say* something in my own name, while relying upon my body, brain, vocal cords, and tongue *in* the world, I perform the act by which these several strata are integrated to a meaning that *transcends* the

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<sup>23</sup> Note that he here deliberately dissociates himself from the work of the first cluster of theorists of testimony; Marcel would consider these philosophers to be investigating warrants for trusting claims to certify this or that as having happened, a set of claims or a form of activity that Marcel actually regards as separate from the activity of testifying.

world.”<sup>24</sup> This motif of speaking *in my own name* closely links Poteat’s work to the explorations of writers I have gathered into the third cluster. The distinctive contribution that Poteat makes here, through his emphasis on tacit integrative powers of the self is that there are not two forms of experience—public and private—corresponding to two forms of speech—propositional and testimonial. When I speak *in my own name* it is the same whether I speak about pain in my arthritic knees, my reluctance to trust someone, the silence into which my prayers seem to fall, Jürgen Moltman’s account of temporality, or the number of books on my shelves. In all cases, I am engaged in the same acts of integration (both in terms of the uncountable particulars I integrate to arrive at my assessment and the complex integrations of the feat of speech itself). In speaking, I own and advance the best of my efforts at sense making here and now. *In my own name*. What Poteat enables us to see is that the alternative to testimony is not demonstration. The alternative, in one register, is deception and, in another register, is parrot speech.

### 3. H. Richard Niebuhr: Temporality

I — Here — Now — Act. Concretely this prereflective “nexus” (to use a Poteatean phrase) rarely rises to explicit attention, and it certainly need not. Reflecting on Poteat in relation to contemporary philosophies of the self, I, however, hold these elements together at the focal center of my attention in this moment here at my desk as I type these words. This act of focal attention may be as close as I<sup>25</sup> can get to what philosophers have been exploring and discovering as they (we) have sought to grasp the nature of this self, this subject who, at once, is thrown into, meets, and constructs “world.” Holding this nexus at the center of mental attention, one might readily fall into a kind of atemporality, imagining this I/here/now/act as the stable, impregnable “center of the world.” Rather like an unchanging monad of intention, will, and decision. One of the achievements of twentieth-century phenomenology is to disclose the degree to which this is a temptation and a mistake. My “now” is never the bare present of registering this or that state of affairs; on the contrary, my “now” carries within it (retains) the my entire arc of experience and activity, as well as the I’s complex

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<sup>24</sup> Poteat, “Reflections on Walker Percy’s Theory of Language,” in *Primacy of Persons*, 253.

<sup>25</sup> Remembering, of course, that the “I” that is held in attention is already removed—abstracted and objectified—from the active “I” who actively holds. Poteat aligned himself with both Marcel and Polanyi in insisting on the inaccessibility of the active “I.”

projected and anticipated future. My-acting is not reducible to the reasoned intuitions and motives that are its prelude. My concrete act is intersubjective intervention (however minor or momentous) that disarranges the given state of things into a new configuration (however limited or dramatic)—a new configuration which initiates its own portfolio of intersubjective and systemic obstacles and possibilities.

This temporalizing of agency is important for many reasons, among them:

- It cracks open the vessel of self-containment, the static capsule notion of the “I”; this makes the objectivization and reduction of the self much more difficult.
- It restores an apprehension of finitude to the self-conception of the “I” (loss, change, death are constitutive of me, not an external enemy over against me).
- It installs interaction, history, social context, and responsiveness at the core of agency.
- It returns freedom to the “I,” which is, to be sure, constituted by its past, but whose operant past does not issue in a determined object but provides the horizon within which the “I” acts according to its own determination of intelligibility and its own motivation to enact and respond.
- It subverts the notion that we are transparent to ourselves.
- Temporalizing what philosophers have previously grasped as static is what acting authentically *does*. Being as fixity to be discovered becomes being as process to be ridden; the self as a durable entity carried “in” time becomes the self as the movement of change (the moving center of a succession of bearing and acting in an intentionally linked process of succession). Not a point but a vector.

Poteat unquestionably belongs among the philosophers and phenomenologists who temporalize the self. The dated entries of his last two books are a deliberate methodological choice, awakening in the reader latent awareness of temporal sequence. In *Philosophical Daybook*, he writes, “I am sentient, motile, and oriented because I do not exist in the instant; because, in other words, my mindbody is temporal and intentional; distended between no-longer and not-yet. This is a truism whose ontological and epistemological significance must not be overlooked” (55). My very being has, he says, a “pretensive/retrotensive structure” (55). He expands this in more vivid ways later in the book in the entry for August 23, 1988, where he describes his project as

an “attempt to think in a new way about memory and hope” (106). The company of phenomenologists who emphasize the temporality of the subject is a large one: Husserl and Heidegger, of course, but also Bergson, Schutz, Levinas, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty, Hartshorne. I have chosen to examine H. Richard Niebuhr’s conception of the time-full self because of my own interest in Niebuhr, because we are here at Yale, and because, at least at points, Poteat temporalizes the “I” very differently from the way Niebuhr does.

When Poteat entered the Yale Divinity School, Niebuhr had just published *The Meaning of Revelation. Christ and Culture* was a decade away, and Niebuhr’s reflections on the timeful self were twenty years in the future. Certainly history as the theater of relativity and change had been a persisting interest of Niebuhr’s from his dissertation forward, and *The Meaning of Revelation* not only insists on “progressive revelation” (with the attendant commitment to the theme of transformation—of the individual life, of the church and religious traditions, of our social and political communities) but also differentiates (as part of the contrast between external and internal history) quantitative, serial conceptions of time (observed change) from an organic, social conception of time as the agent’s felt duration in which “past and future associate with each other in the present” in the phenomena of memory and potentiality.<sup>26</sup> While he links observed, quantitative time to space, he declares that “time in our [experienced] history is not another dimension of the external space world in which we live, but a dimension of our life and of our community’s being. We are not in this time but it is in us.”<sup>27</sup> Time is constitutive of the subject/agent, and to the extent that that is true, community and history are constitutive of the agent as well. That is to say, even as early as 1941, Niebuhr rejects the notion that there is a bounded, atomic self that is embedded in or carried along involuntarily in the some sort of river of time to which it subsequently relates itself as to an external force. On the contrary, “we do not only live among other selves but they live in us and we in them. Relations here are not external but internal so that we are our relations and cannot be selves save as we are members of each other.”<sup>28</sup> This participation is not merely contemporaneous. While it makes sense to Niebuhr to differentiate individuals (each with a unique point of view) from communities, he presents the boundaries between individuals and their communities as maximally porous. Individuals are constituted by the

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<sup>26</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, intro. by Douglas F. Ottati, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1941.2006), 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, *Revelation*, 37.

communities in which we participate and communities themselves are constituted as such by memory and hope.

I may have heard Poteat speak of Niebuhr while I was at Duke, but I have no certain memory of that. No member of my cohort worked on Niebuhr, and I stumbled on his work by accident after I left Durham and was in Washington hunting for a dissertation topic (I picked up Niebuhr's *Responsible Self* in a used book store simply because I was intrigued by the title). When I decided on Niebuhr as a subject, Poteat did not indicate any particular enthusiasm for that or make any comment on his own connection to the man, nor did he give me any help as I was writing the thesis. I do recall that writing a dissertation centered on *The Responsible Self* was an exercise in what I think Poteat would call retrotending. What Niebuhr said about the self in very ordinary, clear language helped me immensely in my understanding of what Poteat had argued to and with us.

It was in the study of *The Responsible Self* that some glimmer of the temporality of the "I" appeared in my conceptual map—but it is actually only recently, and largely through the study of the work of Paul Ricoeur, that I have begun to see why the temporality of the "I" is so important. I have also come to think that it is a feature of Poteat's position to which attention should be paid as a significant dimension of the "post" of "post-critical." It is also important because the insistence on the temporality of the "I" opens on Poteat's (and Ricoeur's) commitment to narrative sense-making. Stories are important because they are concrete and thus resist the abstractive tendencies of reflection, but they also snare us in the intricate net of time—the temporality of experience, the temporality of disclosure, and the temporal or historical context of the act of composing and the act of receiving. I will need to leave the exploration of the theme of narrative in Poteat's work for another time or for other hands, but there is one irony over which I puzzle: For all his awareness of the temporality of the subject, Poteat presented philosophical texts ahistorically.<sup>29</sup> My own approach to texts is similarly ahistorical: here is a living voice that calls to me to hear, to whom I listen, with whom I am engaged. This is, of course, how we keep these texts from becoming simple objects of observation, but it is not easy to square this way of reading with insistence on

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<sup>29</sup> In "Poteat on Modern Culture and Critical Philosophy" (*Tradition and Discovery* 21.1 [1994–1995]: 45–50), E. M. Adams holds Poteat accountable on just this point. Although he considers Poteat to be correct about "the derangement of the modern Western mind," his "misgivings" about Poteat's account reflect his belief that Poteat fails to set his philosophical adversaries in their decisive temporal context, nor does he give them credit for creatively engaging the particular problems unique to their historical moment.

the temporality of the self.

Niebuhr's abbreviated argument in *The Meaning of Revelation* that time "is in us" and is in us *constitutively* is elaborated in *The Responsible Self*, which was edited and published posthumously from the manuscript copies of his Robertson Lectures, delivered at the University of Glasgow in the spring of 1960. Chapter 3 explores "The Responsible Self in Time and History." I want to review Niebuhr's argument in some detail because it is possible to notice Poteat's "recovery" of the importance of time without fully appreciating what this recovery means.

### 3.1 Niebuhr's analysis of time and responsibility

*The Responsible Self* is structured comparatively around three contrasting symbols under which an individual might "[apprehend] the form of his practical life and . . . [give] shape to it in action":<sup>30</sup> man the maker (teleological ethics), man the citizen or man under the law (deontological ethics), and man the answerer (Niebuhr's own proposed model, which he calls *cathekontic* ethics, or the ethics of the fitting). He makes the point that although the symbol of man-the-maker gives attention to futurity (the projected state of affairs that is to be brought about), this model confers little or no significance on the present or the past. Systems of thought or practice derived under this model are thus prone to unrealistic hopes and deracinate projections disconnected from particular histories and established systems of interactions. Man-under-the-law, in contrast, analyzes the agent's situation in terms of a denuded present. Niebuhr quotes Kant's observation that "reason recognizes no distinction of time" (91). Kierkegaard and the "extreme existentialists" (92) offer an anthropology that is, if possible, even more atemporal than that of Kant. They seem bent on *subtracting* "from existing man . . . his time-fullness, his past and future and his historicity" (92). Niebuhr regards this as false to our lived awareness of ourselves and our lived awareness of "the selves my companions reveal to me" (92).

In developing his distinctive model of man-the-answerer, Niebuhr strives to restore what the other models subtract. To bring the time-fullness of the acting self into view and give it its proper weight, Niebuhr divides his discussion into two principal parts: (1) time is in me and (2) I am in time—that is, I am

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<sup>30</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, intro by James M. Gustafson, foreword by William Schweiker, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1963, 1999), 48. Page citations for subsequent quotations from this work are given parenthetically in the text.

myself in a particular historical community that predates me and whose future I help to create.

*Time is in me:* Niebuhr concurs that to say “I” is always to orient all otherness to my “now”: “It is a self that is always in the present to be sure, always in the moment, so that the very notion of the *present* is probably unthinkable apart from some implicit reference to a self. /and *now* belong together somewhat as do I and Thou and I and It” (93, italics original). However, the *now* is not an abstracted moment in the lived experience of the self (though it may be construed that way by a detached observer). “For the time-full self the past and the future are not the no-longer and the not-yet; they are extensions of the present. They are the still-present and the already-present” (93). The present past is “conscious and unconscious memory”—my own and my community’s. Guilt and love, alike, are dimensions of the present past. The past is inscribed in me, yet I live toward the future. The present future includes my purposes (plans and projections), but also all my anticipations, anxieties, and hopes.

*Time is in me* in a second sense as well. I am not alone in my *now*. To be at all is “to be in *compresence* with what is not myself” (94), most notably other people and forces who act upon me and to whom or to which I must actively respond. This interaction does not occur in discrete, segmented clumps but is continuous, a temporal process with no true interruptions, short of death (and, perhaps, states of insensibility such as we assume to be the case in comas). Moreover, this process of continuous temporal interaction stretching from before my birth to my death (and even after), installs itself within the rich temporality of my *now*, for the present past is both the conscious memory of encounter (their acts, my interpretations and responses, my realized or disappointed expectations about their responses to my response) and the unconscious bearing of the inscription of the marks of others on my being (even at so basic a level as language acquisition). The present future that I project is also a rich affair of compresence: “For this future into which the self forever advances is also an affair of encounter, of action and response, of meeting with compresences” (95). Niebuhr thus joins thinkers like Marcel, Levinas, and Ricoeur in considering the other to be constitutive of the self.

*I am in time.* In my temporally complex *now* I interpret and respond to actions upon me as a historical being who is *here* rather than there, a person with a location, the gift of a specific communal language, an only partially malleable set of constraints, and a set of particular, only partially adjustable, options. At first, *time in me* and *my being in time* do not seem to be anything other than slightly different presentations of the same insight, an insight that

might be construed as either (1) to see reality as fundamentally temporal requires that the self be understood to be temporal as well or (2) a duplicative acknowledgement of the paradoxical coincidence of the horizon of the past with the horizon of the future. Reflecting on why Niebuhr takes us through both discloses the importance of the activity of interpretation in Niebuhr discussion of responsibility. The present past of my *now* is constructed through my interpretations of the events and actions to which I have been a party; the past does not simply stamp itself upon me. There are no two selves, no matter how similar their experiences may have been, who carry about with them the same present past. Yet they have, in some sense, a common history, and that history leaves its own independent traces in their common world. Moreover, the self responding in its *now* must struggle to fit itself to a history of which it is not the architect, a history that is the sedimentation of the actions of innumerable others. But it is a dynamic, not an inert sedimentation—a set of forces, institutions, systems, interacting others, all coupled with changing material circumstances and non-human events. So it is that “man responding in the present is interpreting what acts upon him as historical being, being in time” (98). This experience of passivity before realities that transcend all our individual and communal efforts (that is, these realities are involuntarily suffered rather than voluntarily evoked) induces in us the sense (in most cases the *certainty*) that we live under threat. We experience what we meet as a “threatening power that is not identifiable with any specific agency we meet but rather with a movement or a law of interaction of all things, a law of our history” (98). This produces a crisis that can only be addressed, if it can be addressed at all, by novel acts of reinterpretation.

Substituting “interpretation” where others might appeal to firm rational “knowledge” or a static “worldview,” Niebuhr installs temporality at the heart of point-of-view. “This time-full self in encounter [which is itself ‘continuous interaction,’ not some sort of fragment of ‘timeless being’] responds to actions upon it in accordance with interpretations that are themselves time-full” (95). Moreover, the interpretations are generated with tools that are time-indexed in the face of events that emerge and fade. Our “interpretative equipment” (96) has been formed by our social and individual past, with the result that “the responsive, interpreting self is highly conservative” (95). Yet every response is made in anticipation of future responses and with the purpose of fitting one’s action into evolving relationships and evolving social and relational structures of conflict and connection. Sense-making is a mobile, constructive enterprise of pursuing a narrative pathway that forms a future around itself (both (a) the future I anticipate and (b) the future that will actually come to pass in this web of interaction as a consequence of my interpretive response here and now). Our efforts to fit effectively into this evolving context are themselves dependent on

the time span that frames our interpretive effort in the present (“brief pasts and brief futures,” the span of my lifetime, the future of our nation, or the full sweep of history as we envision it). And, of course, all these envisioned frames are themselves time-full interpretations that belong to the moment of response—and are susceptible to change. This susceptibility to change is the locus of our freedom. “The question of freedom arises in this connection as the question of the self’s ability in its present to change its past and future and to achieve or receive a new understanding of its ultimate historical context” (101). The present past of remembrance which forms our “inherited patterns of interpreting the beings and actions to whom [we] respond in the present” can be altered, within the constraints of fidelity, through novel acts of interpretation (102). What he has in mind is very different from the habit of rewriting history for the support of existing arrangements and the convenience and comfort of the voracious ego and its present privileges. It involves, rather, a *richer truthful* memory, a mining of the past we have carried forward (or perhaps even forgotten) for the traces, strands, and patterns that would help us move creatively into the emerging future that we are constructing by responding to present challenges.

But because the future that guides our responses is the present anticipated future, that, too, is subject to reinterpretation. Such reinterpretations may arise as a consequence of new information (about the food supply or population growth rates or the carbon load of the atmosphere) or because, in an arena of shifting alliances, we come to identify with some person or community whose point of view we did not share before. Any such reinterpretation affects our judgments concerning the fitting response as we act in the now. Action, then, is inseparable from some sort of temporal narrative, just as the action itself, far from being controlled and “discrete,” becomes an irreversible element in an evolving web.

Considered in such a radically temporal way, the boundaries of the “self” blur and fade: “the agencies that act on me remain manifold and so am I manifold” (137). The timeful “I” is also radically contingent; I can find nothing in myself that is stable, pre-existent, invulnerable. The I’s “haunting sense of unity and of universal responsibility” (139) arises only in the temporal process of being called out of a particular past to respond here and now to the “other” whose requirements are thus written constitutively into my evolving identity.

### **3.2 Music and the bodymind**

There are both similarities and differences when we compare the temporalizing of the self in Niebuhr and Poterat.

Considering Poteat in relation to Niebuhr's line of argument, we can see the phenomenal importance of Poteat's appeal at many points in his seminars and in his publications to the temporal character of music. Music, speech, movement, integrations are all intrinsically temporal, and that is neither trivial nor regrettable.<sup>31</sup> Though Niebuhr writes less about music, in the work of both Niebuhr and Poteat, the shift from the eye to the ear, from vision to hearing, from viewing to responding, from proposition to story is central to the project of "recovery" and indispensable for reliable self-understanding.

When Poteat writes, "my tonic mindbody, in every present moment both pretending the future and retrotending the past, is, for me, inextricably implicated with the world and its unidirectional, irreversible flow,"<sup>32</sup> his analysis sounds much like Niebuhr's argument that "time is in me." For Poteat, though, our intrinsically temporal embodiment provides a bonding similarity among agents that underplays (and perhaps undermines) Niebuhr's emphasis on plurality.

*Polanyian Meditations* offers a phenomenological analysis of time that is quite different from Niebuhr's in being more bodily and less social. Poteat analyzes the "temporal density" of the five-mile run from which he has just returned.<sup>33</sup> He differentiates (at least) three dimensions of temporality: (1) the spacio-temporal background against which the run stands out, (2) the causal integrations of his bodymind running (providing styles, motifs, motives), and (3) the temporal form of his perceptions while running. Notwithstanding the fact that this analysis is offered as a subordinate part of a difficult argument concerning the differing special powers of sight and hearing, it still strikes me as significant and revealing that he chooses this kind of case for the analysis of temporality: we are asked to consider one man engaged in a physical activity which he carries out by himself and reflects upon by himself in the privacy of his study.

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<sup>31</sup> Poteat grants that vision is also temporal, requiring as it does attention and complex series of integrations. Sight has, however, been (falsely) *imagined* or *conceived* as atemporal, producing an inaccurate picture that has held captive the Western mind. Sound or music is not similarly amenable to abstractive fixation in static representations and it thus can be used effectively to falsify the dominant "picture." See William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985), 58.

<sup>32</sup> Poteat, *Philosophical Daybook*, 107.

<sup>33</sup> Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, 53–58, 63–66.

Poteat's representation of the "I," though distinctively temporalized, is (for better or worse) less transparent and less intersubjective than Niebuhr's. David Rutledge is quite right to raise a question as to "whether or not [Poteat] gives sufficient attention to the sociality, the inter-personal relationships, that lie at the heart of human life."<sup>34</sup> My own judgment is that his work is weaker than that of Arendt, Marcel, and Niebuhr in this regard, despite an array of embedded resources. This is, I think, because he chose to anchor the "who" in embodiment rather than action—the "here" and "now" of place rather than the "here" and "now" of dynamic transformation. Compared to these other three, Poteat's treatment of the "I" remains quite individualistic. Yet compared to Poteat's account, the others do not sing.

There is probably no single truth here. The way forward may very plausibly involve a both/and.

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<sup>34</sup> David W. Rutledge, "William Poteat: The Primacy of the Person," *Tradition and Discovery* 40.2 (2013–2014): 43; the essay was originally published in *Appraisal* 7.2 (October 2008).

## Appendix

### “Modernity” as Flybottle? Modernity as Habitation?

In *Ways of Judgment*, Oliver O'Donovan describes “modernity” as “that great carcass around which a shoal of shark-toothed narratives forever wheels and hovers.”<sup>35</sup>

The purpose of the opening presentation in this session is simply to provoke an inclusive conversation about Poteat in relation to his intellectual fellow travelers—his debts (overt and covert), his tensive engagement, and his departures. Although these fellow travelers are advertised in the program as “modernity’s critics” and although Poteat and some of these companionate thinkers were undoubtedly critical of a certain strand of abstract modern Western epistemology, it is worth asking whether the object of their criticism was, in any precise sense, “modernity.”

Of course, the conference organizers drew this language from Poteat’s own discourses. The appendix in *Recovering the Ground* opens with the salvo:

“A wasting disease has afflicted the human spirit, perhaps mortally, for now more than 300 years. We have, as Pascal saw at modernity’s outset, simultaneously believed that we are gods and that we are nothing. This pitiless dialectic rends our souls from our bodies and suspends us in a lethal skepticism that at once flatters us and isolates us from our human reality” (188).

Or consider the quotation that Dale put on the website in the article on Poteat’s teaching. This is his comment on why he chose the particular texts he did:

“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

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<sup>35</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, The Bampton Lectures, 2003 (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 298.

under attack.”

One could assemble many passages of this sort (the sickness, madness, bankruptcy of our age), and it would actually be interesting to gather them all up, if only to see how consistent they are. But while this overwrought rhetoric was a substantial part of Poteat’s charisma as a teacher (what twenty-something does not want to think of herself as part of the salvation of the world?!), it may actually have been something of a distraction from, and even an obstacle to, the lasting philosophical contribution he might have made.

I have three reasons for objecting to the characterization of Poteat and his confreres as “critics of modernity”:

### 1.

To begin with, to frame the project as a critique of modern culture is deconstructive rather than constructive, and all this fascination with the sickness or bankruptcy of “modern culture” tends to lure one into the fly-bottle from which one wishes to help others escape.

Given the sheer volume of critiques of modernity, why doesn’t something change? Or has it? How would we know, swimming in this culture as we do? Is it not possible that those “embrangled” in a critique of modernity are as much caught in the fly bottle as the prisoners they want to assist in escaping? Possibly the true therapeutic move here is to acknowledge that “modernity” is not the problem. Descartes is not the problem. Kant is not the problem. The Enlightenment is not the problem. The human condition presents the same challenges across time, although these perplexities and *insolubilia*<sup>36</sup> shape themselves differently in different historical contexts. Human lives can be relatively fuller or relatively more impoverished, relatively coherent or relatively incoherent, but we are not likely to ever feel that we have truly come home to ourselves. The challenge is to bring some sort of satisfying and relatively unconfused life out of the muddle, despite all the failures, flaws, limitations, and rifts or tensions that come with the package. Our context is always inadequate to our desires. Tragically, our very thinking and acting are prone to confusion, deception, falsification, and contradiction. Some, but by no means all, of this

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<sup>36</sup> The word is Marcel’s, though he uses it in a narrower sense than I am using it here. See Marcel, “An Essay in Autobiography,” 106.

disorder, alienation, and duplicity arises from the metaproblematic<sup>37</sup> character of the ground of our reflection. In addition, our well-being and life-ways are appallingly vulnerable to the systemic facts of conferred (earned or unearned) recognition and status, the scarcity of resources, and the often necessary sacrifice of the individual will to the requirements of life in communities—not to mention subjection to the brutal deployment of force. No era has been free of systemic pathologies like violence, exclusion, injustice, oppressive exercise of power, and so on.

There are certain errors and discontents that tend to arise over and over again because we are the kind of creatures that we are and because the human condition is what it is. I have always been far more interested in Poteat's ability to expose both those underlying structures that help us understand why things go so persistently to the bad than in his frontal attacks. Likewise, I find his work most engaging when he is most caught up in wonderment (both intense whole-person wondering and intense receptivity to a world apprehended as wonder-ful).

## 2.

"Modernity," or "modern culture," is such a broad term as to be almost meaningless. Do we find body/mind dualism problematic? Do we want to highlight the ill effects of excessive skepticism in epistemology or human affairs? Do we want to explore the effects on philosophical argument of something that might properly be called the Enlightenment's "theater of solitude"?<sup>38</sup> Do we worry about depersonalization and even dehumanization? Let us, by all means, engage these problems in an appropriately diverse "space of appearances." But any and all of those conversations can be carried on very effectively without even bringing up the problematic notion of "modernity." There are many good reasons to meet "grand narratives" with skepticism. It's not that we do not need them—we probably cannot do without them. It is just that they obscure as much as they reveal, and they can militate against the finely textured arguments that are needed if progress is to be made on any particular conceptual problem.

## 3.

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<sup>37</sup> This again is a term used by Marcel, and Poteat cites it as such, clarifying its relevant meaning thus: "the ground of reflection is finally opaque to reflection." See Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> For a definition, see Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook*, 59. For the linkage of the Theater of Solitude to atemporality, see Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook*, 11. See also, Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, 36, 197–204.

From one angle of analysis, Poteat is actually himself thoroughly representative of “modernity” (or one important strand of our reflective preoccupation over the past three or four hundred years). Poteat’s focus on language and self-consciousness is distinctively “modern.” Consider this wistful comment of Benedetto Croce:

“We no longer believe. . . , like the Greeks, in happiness of life on earth; we no longer believe, like the Christians, in happiness in an other-worldly life; we no longer believe, like the optimistic philosophers of the last century, in a happy future for the human race. . . . We no longer believe in anything of that, and *what we have alone retained is the consciousness of ourselves, and the need to make that consciousness ever clearer and more evident, a need for whose satisfaction we turn to science and to art.*”<sup>39</sup>

In a conversation between Marcel and Paul Ricoeur, Ricoeur made the point that Marcel reads Descartes “in Kantian terms” and thus reduces the *cogito* to “the epistemological subject.” In fact, Ricoeur suggests, “Descartes himself saw in the *cogito* essentially the affirmation, ‘I am.’ In this sense, perhaps you [Marcel] recover in your work Descartes’s forgotten intention by taking the ‘I am’ in all its density.”<sup>40</sup> If we are prepared to look at Descartes in that way, Poteat (along with Marcel) seems more his (obstreperous) heir than his enemy.

My real worry, frankly, is that it may be precisely the passing of modernity that will make Poteat’s vision and his contribution worthless, along with all the other forms of personalism (for want of a better word) that have animated our inquiry for four centuries in the West. I have a colleague, a historian, who repeatedly says, “Modernity is over. The post-modern died on 9/11. The only question is, What comes next? And this won’t be something shaped by those of us in universities. Our job, she says, is to pay enough attention to *notice* what is happening.” Such “noticing,” such “paying attention,” is wildly different from hacking lumps of fat and gristle off that “great carcass.”

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<sup>39</sup> Benedetto Croce, quoted in M. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890–1930*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1977), 428–29. Although the passage is fairly frequently quoted, I have not yet been able to establish the original source, though it may be an essay titled “Una vecchia questione: arte e morale.”

<sup>40</sup> Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel, “Conversations between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel: Conversation 2,” in Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond, including Conversations between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 227.

My colleague, for example, is teaching transhumanism (H+) and structures her “noticing” around GRIN technologies (genetics, robotics, information systems, and nanotech—what one commentator calls the four horsemen of the Apocalypse). There is a lot to notice: drones; robots rolling down the hospital hallway; proposals to turn over to artificial intelligence battlefield decisions about which targets to hit and which military actions do and do not accord with the Geneva Conventions; vast accumulations of data and unprecedented levels of surveillance, the machining of industry toward human redundancy; uncontrollable cascades of computerized exchanges in the global financial sector; corporatization and standardization of interpersonal activities (including education) on an industrial scale; rationalization and routinization of human exchanges; homogenization of contexts, desires, and points of view; paramilitary arsenals stockpiled in the apartment next door; virtualization of contact, communication, and “real life”. . . In the face of changes on this scale, it might well seem that the “great carcass” of modernity is already pretty well rotted away, leaving only those shoals of hovering critics to mark the place it once lay.