

Poteat and Psychoanalysis

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Part I Poteat and Freud

Words are blazes made by the axe of the human intellect on the trees of the otherwise trackless forest of human experience.

William James

Key Words: primal ground, transitional object, transference, cause, nonconceptual, emotional understanding, natal matrix, Oedipus complex, acting out.

In this brief essay I will argue that Poteat clears post-critical ground for the discoveries of Freud, the “humanist”, the practice of psychoanalysis and for the legitimacy of Freudian psychological reflections on human development. I will maintain that Poteat considered Freud to be a “great genius” dimensions of whose work illuminate the human condition in a most profound way. At the same time Freud was a fascinating subject for Poteat because he exemplified many of the philosophical commitments of the Enlightenment that Poteat meant to critique. Also I argue that several contemporary psychoanalytic theorists are allies in Poteat’s battle against the philosophically corrosive effects of Cartesianism.

(Re. the notes: **PP** refer to **Primacy of Persons**, **PM** refers to **Polanyian Meditations**, **RG** refers to **Recovering the Ground**, **PD** refers to **Philosophical Daybook** **CS** refers to Erikson’s **Childhood and Society**, **EER** refers to **The Erik Erikson Reader** }

Sitting in a classroom on the Yale Divinity School campus 57 years ago I asked Browne Barr, professor of homiletics, “What good are words?” Looking back, it was an impertinent, everybody knows the answer to that kind of question. Nevertheless, it was a question that troubled me because I had lost faith in the bearing of words on reality. Professor Barr, to his credit, suggested I needed to consult a philosopher.

It turns out that six years later the person I met who had thought deeply about this taken for granted commonsensical question was William Poteat. That meeting was considerably after I had, ironically, plunged into an exploration of counseling psychology based largely on the discoveries of Freud, the founder of “the talking cure”, whose medium of exchange relies heavily on the power of words to reveal a certain kind of reality.

Regarding Freud, it was Poteat who said, “It is only because ‘believing’, even neurotic ‘believing’, is a transaction that must occur in the interpersonal universe of speech and personal identity that psychotherapy, by means of talking and a form of acting out, can enable one who ‘owns’ his beliefs to come to ‘own-up-to’ them. It is all of this that makes the Freudian use of ‘cause’ so odd, so revolutionary, and so productive. It is a cause that can be dissolved with a word.” (PP 227 underlining mine) When I first read these underlined words tears of recognition came into my eyes. I felt the emotional power of their impact before I was able to articulate their meaning. What Poteat is referring to in this cryptic statement is that Freud’s use of the word

'cause' is actually a rejection of the explanation of neurotic beliefs as "caused" by lesions in the central nervous system in favor of a use of 'cause' which refers to neurotically engendered beliefs which are capable of being dissolved through first person dialogue between patient and therapist, an interpersonal dialogue in which actions and reasons, not neurophysiological causes, have cash value.

However, as soon as Poteat says these words about the healing power of words he points out that "...as valuable as words may be, the shape of the world in which we live is not given only, perhaps not even primarily, in concepts." (PP 323) Characteristically he says the 'shape' of our world "...is *lived* (italics his) in and through our bodies, our choices as they are manifested in our actions, our movements"... , routines, rituals, shapes, colors, sounds, joy, depression, anxiety, etc. "Our way of *feeling* (italics his) in the world, the rhythms of our being at home here have some kind of order and therefore may be thought of as having a kind of syntax." (PP 323) Here Poteat footnotes Eric Fromm, a Freudian psychoanalyst, *The Forgotten Language*, who speaks "unhesitatingly" (Poteat's word) of the nonconceptual ordering of our world after the analogy of language. Poteat goes on to say, "...these structures cause each of us to take hold of our world in one way rather than another". (PP 323) This idea of taking hold of our world in one way or another is very important to Poteat. We will return to it later.

Continuing to emphasize the nonconceptual dimensions of being human, Poteat asserts that "Each man's own existence is essentially the enactment of a drama having for its stage both the conceptual and the nonconceptual. If it were not so, deep personal disorientations of the sort with which psychoanalysis has to deal... could quite simply be cured by bracing verbal clarification, an attempted translation of the symbolic into the verbal. Poteat says, "There is a very strong hint of this in Freud's theory (in contradistinction to his practice, of which he was a bad observer)." (PP 323)

If "bracing verbal clarification" is not enough to overcome "deep personal disorientations", then what more is required in the psychoanalytic process? Poteat hints at this when he says that psychoanalysis operates not only by talking but by a "form of acting out". (PP 227) The reference is to the fact that the patient will "act out" in his/her relationship with the therapist patterns of his/ her disorientation, opening the process to the nonconceptual or feeling level in which tone, rhythm, mood, posture, gesture, facial expression, anxiety, fear, depression and all the tacit features of human interaction are present. Analysts call this process the "transference".

Erik Erikson, says that Freud, observed some patients who in hypnosis suggested that he (Freud) stop interrupting them with his authoritative suggestions. When he did they unearthed memories and *affects* (italics mine) he would never have suspected. Then he came to realize that "...if he treated them like whole people, they would learn to realize the wholeness which was theirs. He now offered them a conscious and direct partnership: he made the patient's healthy, if submerged, part his partner in understanding the unhealthy part." (EER 146f)

Poteat puts it this way: "There is a sense in which we may say that the neurotic is a creature of a world of his own 'imagination' to which he then becomes subject—incarcerated as a prisoner. The job of the therapist is, as an outsider, to invade that world and to enhance his patient's wish to be free. (Underlining mine) "The invasion is a kind of incarnation for the therapist enters

the neurotic's world from the outside and remains, while in it, an outsider, lest he, like his patient, becomes the subject of that world, powerless against it." (PP 283) Poteat expands this analogy saying that we are "prisoners of the picture each of us has of what the world is like". We are "defensive" and "anxious" before any invasion of it. "We can be set free only when that picture is 'ravished by reality or by God'". (PP 283)

How could Poteat use Freudian concepts in good faith when so many of Freud's ideas have been rejected as mechanistic, reductionist, etc.? Poteat looks at it this way: Based on Freud's self-observation and recurring evidence from his patients' memories of sexual affects and fantasies and the transfer of an early father image onto later individuals, it is Freud the humanist who remembers Sophocles' drama of the Greek tragic hero, Oedipus, and uses its heuristic potential to illuminate the neuroses of his patients and in so doing chooses what for Poteat is one of the signal achievements of ancient Greek drama: the elevation of the human being to a position where he is seen performing an act of freedom from the world of necessity by playing "let's pretend", thereby intimating some sense of the pronoun first person singular, some sense of what it means to be a "person". (PP 57)

Contrary to critical philosophizing, says Poteat, the Oedipus complex, shows us, that "... mind is not just consciousness... but as Augustine said, 'man is a great deep.' " And the Oedipus myth reminds us that we are not only mysteries to ourselves but also that we repress and rationalize painful anxiety producing truths about ourselves." (PP 282f)

According to Poteat, with the Oedipus story as his model, Freud's concepts like Oedipus complex, repression, infant sexuality, the unconscious and cause were "... in the same logical environment with persons, action, reasons, belief, assents, 'owning-up-to' etc. albeit in an unusual but legitimate way." (PP 225)

In a typically elegant way Poteat affirms the stance of Freud the analyst (underlining mine) when he says that, "... even in the case of neurotically engendered belief there is an 'ownership' of the words and the acts. The person holding them is *responsible* or at least proto-responsible, for them: *actually* responsible in one way: *potentially* in another. He is taken by Freud the analyst as proleptically responsible. No account of neurotically engendered beliefs which lacks this built-in logical tension and complexity is Freudian. And I will say, neither is it really believable." (PP 226f) With this linguistic analysis Poteat has preserved the post-critical legitimacy of psychoanalytic discourse in so far as it attends to its healing task and to a non-reductive understanding of human development.

Pursuing the dimension of human development, Poteat says, "The child who knows what it is to be securely and lovingly held, lives, moves and deploys his body, and expresses himself in action in a *very* different world from one who has never known this." (PP 324)

Although he gives no specific reference for this assertion, elsewhere in a note (PM 49) Poteat refers to the illuminating work of Freudian psychoanalyst Erik Erikson as set forth in Erikson's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Childhood and Society*, a work which elaborates and extends the insights of Freud the "doctor" as Erikson calls him, for understanding human development from childhood forward in its individual, social and cultural manifestations.

Poteat says of Erikson that his “psychological reflections” upon our ways of being in the world are of great import, that they are “cognate” findings of Polanyi’s tacit/explicit, proximate/distal poles being primitively given.

The operative words here for our purposes are “primitively given” as in archaic, as in the natal matrix and infancy, the primitive linguistic substratum, the time in which the infant, for better or worse, is experiencing what it feels like to be alive in the world, to live in the world, to be in the world in one way rather than another. This is what Poteat calls the pre-reflective, pre-linguistic Eden out of which, for Erikson, and Poteat also, human beings have an enduring sense of “paradise forfeited”. (CS 250) In Polanyian terms, for Erikson it is the primitive proximate of the “proximate- distal” poles, the tacit memory of which prompts us to take hold of the world psychologically in one explicit way rather than another.

For both Poteat and Erikson the primal ground, the bodily beginning, the progenitor of human being is the natal matrix and infancy. (The implications of this point for infant language acquisition are spelled out in some detail by Poteat in PM pp. 194-197 where he cites a number of empirical studies of language learning among human infants as confirmation of his own findings)

Erikson rejects the narrow positivist approach to psychology and the separation of psychology from biology and from the social sciences, preferring instead to study the “process” of “human life”. (CS p36) This approach bears great similarity to Poteat’s who speaks of the “inherent interest for us of *psyche*, *socius* and *polis* as the “arena of human action” as “manifestations of our human, personal context” from which we “mind bodily” demand a larger meaning, (PM 249) a human meaning which Erikson gives in an incredibly persuasive way in his elaboration of the “Eight Ages of Man” to which Poteat refers specifically.

Working developmentally, Erikson presents eight contrasting pairs of ways of being in the world which are primitively given, i.e. they spring from the primitive, archaic, tacitly given natal matrix and infancy to explicit ways of being in the world, and Erikson ties each age to this primitive given. The eight stages, spanning the life time of the individual and incorporating the social and cultural implications and consequences of each age are as follows: Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Identity vs. Role Confusion, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation and Ego Integrity vs. Despair.

I will give just one of many examples in which Erikson relates the parent/child nexus to its communal/institutional manifestation: Discussing the Age of Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust, Erikson says, “The parental faith which supports the trust emerging in the newborn, has throughout history sought its institutional safeguard (and on occasion its greatest enemy) in organized religion. Trust born of care is, in fact, the touchstone of the actuality of a given religion.” (CS 250) In a footnote to this section Erikson is careful to point out that he is referring only to the communal and psychosocial side of religion and not, for example, it’s spiritual aspect. He is not a Freudian reductionist!

Poteat was very critical of the Freudianism of some of Freud's followers whose rigid views he characterized as various kinds of critical absolutism including "abstraction" which is identifying thought as such with its embodiment in language; "ecumenism" which is seeing an object as a finite totality and "ontological monism" which decontextualizes its object. (RG 155f) Although Poteat does not criticize Freud himself for such rigidity, he (Poteat) recounts a beautiful story of an Armenian family tragedy and triumph in which he points out that Freudian categories, as important as they may be for psychotherapy, cannot encompass the full meaning of the richly complex lives and histories of persons. (RG 154). Poteat affords a very important additional illustration of this point with regard to the psychoanalyst himself in a discussion of the relationship between Freud's theory and his practice when he says that as between theory and practice there is a "tacitly" supplied *tertium quid* which is the practitioner himself with all his complex life and personal history much of which he, in this case Freud, is only tacitly aware but all of which has some bearing on his interchange with patients, a dialogue which explicitly stated theory does not and cannot exhaustively explain. (PD 38-40 and 53f)

Poteat's most pointed critique of Freud is as follows: "Even so great a genius as Freud, the contemporary articulator of the profound importance of the nonconceptual world and what we have rather simplistically called the irrational, betrays the power of rationalism over his own imagination by repeatedly implying that the norm for *human* existence is the power which man has to *conceive*, that the *rational* or conceptual grasp of the etiology of one's past is that by which man becomes human rather than the far richer notion that man becomes human through the capacity for assuming responsibility, for taking his past upon himself, for speaking in his own name, for saying 'I'". (PP 324)

The very important corollary of this assumption of responsibility for oneself is that in the wider "verbal" culture it is the antecedent "... nonconceptual openness and responsibility of persons to one another" (PP 326) that is the *common ground* (words and italics mine) of their relationship, a relationship which must be *acted out* (words and italics mine) This is also the ground of genuine psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

Concluding Part 1, I quote a few lines from WH Auden's poem, *In Memory of Sigmund Freud* written on the occasion of Freud's death in 1939: (Poteat liked and sometimes quoted this poem)

He wasn't clever at all: he merely told
the unhappy Present to recite the Past
like a poetry lesson till sooner
or later it faltered at the line where

long ago the accusations had begun,
and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
how rich life had been and how silly,
and was life forgiven and more humble,

able to approach the Future as a friend
without a wardrobe of excuses, without
a set mask of rectitude or an

embarrassing over-familiar gesture.

Two questions presenters of this session were asked to address:

Question #1

With regard to the question of how or whether Poteat's notion of the insanity of modernism agrees with the psychotherapeutic/psychoanalytic notion of insanity, I would say that "Insanity" is a word almost never used in contemporary psychoanalysis/psychotherapy. "Mentally ill" is the more often used term. It means to suffer from highly problematic emotions and/or behavior which affect one's way(s) of being in the world, usually accompanied by an underlying sense of anxiety which manifests itself in a wide variety of guises including depression, feelings of isolation and hopelessness which, if severe enough, can lead to suicide and/or murder.

Poteat's contention is that modernism is "mad" because it is profoundly unsettled and disordered having lost the sense of form and order in the cosmos. With regard to knowing and being modernism has lost the primacy of the personal, surrendering it to the impersonal. These losses have gone largely unnoticed. In *A Philosophical Daybook*, Poteat puts it in psychoanalytic terms: "It (Cartesianism) functions...at a tacit level like a repetition compulsion; it is ubiquitous and pervades the atmosphere of our life like a chronic depression."(p.5) As a result, modernism harbors a pervasive sense of unease which Auden characterized as "The Age of Anxiety". The madness of modernism leads to hopelessness and despair. (Note—a "repetition compulsion" is a psychoanalytic term which refers to the compulsion to repeat negative patterns of behavior even though they continue to be counterproductive.)

Question #2

Considering the question of how Poteat's "philosophical therapy for his students/readers/interlocutors corresponds to actual psychotherapy, the analogy holds in general yet important ways: Both "therapies" are devoted to curing/healing, to self-knowledge. Both rely on trust, mutual respect, ongoing dialogue and the uncovering of "hidden" assumptions which affect ways of being in the world. Both rely heavily on the provision of a "safe" place to explore ideas/feelings without fear that one will be shamed for mistakes or misspoken words. In my experience Poteat was a master in creating such an atmosphere in his classroom. "Mistakes" were prized opportunities for learning!

In both "therapies" a "good outcome" is the assumption of responsibility for one's previously hidden beliefs and actions and the ability and desire to deal with new experience in light of insights, skills and self-confidence one has developed in "therapy". Both therapies give rise to hope in situations of despair. Of course they differ with regard to matters related to the reasons for seeking help, number of clients/students engaged at a time, frequency of meeting, dream work, analysis of transferences, etc.

Part Two
Poteat's Psychoanalytic Allies

Psychoanalysts...deal with people only by the grace of words heard and said.
Richard Simpson

It appears to me that some of Poteat's staunchest allies in "recovering the ground" lost in the Cartesian advance are to be found in the ranks of contemporary psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. They are explorers of the "philosophical/psychological" primal ground which Poteat sought to recover. Their concerns in many ways are his. I believe Poteat sensed accurately the heuristic potential that the Freudian enterprise of psychoanalysis, especially as elucidated by Erik Erikson, held not only for confirmation of his (Poteat's) own findings but for the extension and elaboration of those findings.

Let's look at some examples: First with regard to Cartesianism, in a remarkable work titled *Worlds of Experience* (published 2002) three prominent analysts (Stolorow, Atwood and Orange) launch a frontal assault on Cartesian influences on psychoanalytic theory with these words: "Our aim is twofold: first to expose and deconstruct the assumptions, largely a legacy of Descartes philosophy, that have undergirded traditional and much contemporary psychoanalytic thinking; and second, to lay the foundations for a post-Cartesian psychoanalytic psychology grounded in an intersubjective contextualism." (Op. cit. vii)

In this work Stolorow et.al. launch a thorough going and devastating critique of Cartesian "isolated mind" thinking beginning with Freud and extending through contemporary psychoanalytic theory. Drawing on philosophical resources found in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, William James, CS Peirce and HG Gadamer, Charles Taylor and Michael Polanyi they fashion a postmodern philosophical stance not unlike that of Poteat and Polanyi which they call "perspectival realism": seeing truth as gradually emergent in dialogic community.

Orange in a work titled, *Emotional Understanding*, relies heavily on Polanyi's concept of "tacit knowledge" for the *foundation* (EU 108 italics mine) of her understanding of "emotional memory", which refers to the critical importance of the emotional component of knowing which is sensorimotor and affective, present in infancy prior to language, and continues throughout life, not as the precursor of representational, or symbolic cognition but as "*the core of our knowing*". (EU 116)

The very title of a book of essays written by a group of eight prominent Canadian and American psychoanalysts, *The Embodied Subject, Minding the Body in Psychoanalysis*, (2007) should pique the interest of Poteat scholars. The title of this work was the theme of a yearlong seminar sponsored by the Forum on Psychiatry and the Humanities of the Washington School of Psychiatry.

On the first page of the introduction one of the editors, John P. Muller, says, “My basic premise is that only a speaking being can be embodied, in contrast to views of embodiment in which mind is ‘in’ a brain or a brain is in a body, as if embodiment is equivalent to physical containment”. (vii) And that’s just for openers!

One of the contributors, Roger Frie, who is co-editor of the *International Journal of Self Psychology*, in an essay titled, “The Lived Body: From Freud to Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Psychoanalysis” begins his essay as follows: “I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘lived body’ has come closer than most to collapsing the Cartesian duality of mind and body. His philosophy of the lived body demonstrates the way in which understanding, awareness, and communication are all fundamentally embodied. For this reason, I suggest that his ideas are particularly relevant for helping psychoanalysts close the gap between intellect and soma.”

In another outstanding essay in this same volume titled, “That Subtle Knot”, Richard Simpson, a student of French psychoanalysis, addresses the subject of language and the body. Simpson begins by quoting part of John Donne’s poem “The Ecstasy” the first verse of which is as follows:

As our blood labors to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can;
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtle knot, which makes us man;

By way of a critique of what he calls “one dimensional” cognitive linguistics Simpson maintains that in John Donne’s poem “...what was born in the inarticulate language of the soul is transferred into a higher order of nature by means of the body. And, so the body is the location of a bearing across or transfer to a higher order, a *meta-pherein*, (italics his) a literal metaphor.” I believe Poteat would have found this fascinating.

The work of British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott is particularly instructive for its heuristic value when contemplating what I have termed Poteat’s philosophical “primal ground”. The heuristic potential is enhanced by the fact that in this instance Winnicott’s ideas are advanced in a philosophically astute “Afterword” of a work that is considered to be the best criticism ever written of Robert Frost’s poetry: Richard Poirier’s *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*. In what follows, I have relied heavily on Poirier’s exposition of Winnicott’s ideas because he extends the implications of these ideas in such a persuasive way.

In Winnicott’s experience with infants and mothers he became aware of what he termed “transitional objects” which referred more to “transitional states” than objects. He noticed that the child has an enormous subjective and creative investment in these transitions. The essential transitions are these: the infant initially has a sense of being merged with its mother; it then attaches itself to an external object, usually the breast, which is felt by the infant to be a part of

itself; it then moves from this to an object even more external, anything soft and fondle able like a doll, a piece of blanket, a toy which is endowed with some associations attached to the breast. At all stages, including the last, the infant, though in transition from internal to external objects, may and should be given a sense of omnipotence and of magical control. By magical control Winnicott means “the creative aspects of experience”. The infant, who feels omnipotent, confirmed in its illusion that it creates the object of its desire, has the best chance to find its way to a more realistic kind of contact with the increasing number of things which call for its attention as it grows and develops.

In these “transitional states” the infant enters what Winnicott calls an “...intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, *and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.*” (Italics mine) (p.319, 320*The Work of Knowing*)

At this point in his “Afterword” Poirier relates Winnicott’s findings to William James views expressed in “La Notion de Conscience”, one of James’ *Essays in Radical Empiricism* in which James says that “...certain experiences can lead some to others by means of distinctly characterized *intermediary experiences*, in such a fashion that some play the role of known things, the others that of knowing subjects...The attributes ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘represented’ and ‘representative’, ‘thing’ and ‘thought’ mean, then, a practical distinction of the utmost importance, but a distinction which is of a FUNCTIONAL order only, *and not at all ontological as understood by classical dualism*(Italics mine)...Finally, things and thought are made of one and the same stuff, which as such cannot be defined but only experienced...”

Commenting on James’ and Winnicott’s views Poirier says, “Think for a moment what happens to ‘things’, to ‘objects’, in James’ ‘intermediary experiences’ or in Winnicott’s ‘intermediate area of experience’. It is an area ‘unchallenged’...in respect of its belonging to inner or to external (shared) reality.’ *It is precisely in this area, first created by the infant, that the adult creation also takes place.*” (Poirier p. 320f)(Italics mine)

An example of this kind of adult creation comes immediately to mind: Listen to Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, describe his understanding of the process of discovery: “I do not remember exactly at what point I began to apply this way of examining my experience, but very early in life I would imagine myself in the position of the object in which I was interested. Later, when I became a scientist, I would picture myself as a virus, or as a cancer cell, for example, and try to sense what it would be like to be either. I would imagine myself as the immune system, and try to reconstruct what I would do as an immune system engaged in combatting a virus or cancer cell... Before long, this internal dialogue became second nature to me; I found that my mind worked this way all the time.” (As quoted in Moustakas p.15f. This work by a co-founder of the humanistic psychology movement is devoted to first-person epistemology based explicitly on the insights of Michael Polanyi. See my review in *Tradition and Discovery* 38:3)

To sum up, what we have in Winnicott's "transitional objects" "is psychoanalytic confirmation of what I have described as Poteat's "primal ground": a mother "minding" her child rocking to the rhythms of her body's beating heart, the in and out of her breathing, intoning the child with her voice and the texture of her touch. This is the primal place where divisions of subject and object, intelligence and emotion, body and mind do not obtain. This is the primal source of metaphor, words spoken and unspoken. Out of this place, this Eden, the child playing "king of the world" emerges as the adult who 'becomes' a virus and saves the world from polio!

So also for William Poteat; at dusk on an October evening in Athens, torn apart, dis-membered by the sight of a lusty, powerful, inspired statue of a bronze horse; through that dancing figure re-members himself as a brother to Vangelis and heir of Orpheus who bids him sing, before and beyond his literacy, the music and lyrics of the *Polanyian Meditations*.

For myself the question I once posed, "What good are words?" has begun to be answered: Words, especially metaphors, spoken and unspoken call my world(s) into being. As my senses bring me to them, words bring me to my senses. For understanding this gift I am deeply indebted to William H. Poteat, my teacher and my philosophical therapist! In gratitude to him I leave you with this poem from another Orphic voice, Elizabeth Sewell, from her book *The Orphic Voice*.

Ideas

The coming of new forms
Is priestly and war-like: doubled they campaign,
Ringing, besiege the head with holy storms,

Till shouts and trumpets crack
The glassy air; fortifications spill,
And we lie open, to fury and to sack,

And then to all the expanses of the plain,
The World's wide landscape suddenly appears,
And nine huge stars waiting above the hill
Will march through walls of clay-dust to the brain
And camp there, silent, leaning on their spears.

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