CRITICAL RECOLLECTION: POTEAT'S POLANYIAN EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I explore two basic questions that arise from the fact that William H. Poteat subtitled his last book, Recovering the Ground, "Exercises in Critical Recollection." *The first question is: why does he call these dated remarks recollections? The second question is: why does he call them "critical" instead of "post-critical?" I speculate on answers to both of these questions in ways that I think throw light on Polanyi's post-critical project. In answer to the first question, I suggest that Poteat is providing the "from" element in Polanyi's "from-to" distinction a much needed historical emphasis since what we attend "from" is always much more than the parts in an epistemic whole. In my answer to the second question, I offer a view of criticism that is post-critical insofar as it calls us to turn around (to be converted) from critical philosophy's neglect of history and its correlative loss of the world of the things. Poteat is trying to tell us that attention to memory and recollection is a way of subverting discarnate reflection, the best way to return us to the world.*

It may have occurred to you, as it has to me, to wonder why Bill Poteat subtitled his last book, "*Critical Exercises in Recollection.*" Perhaps you may have found it strange that he did not subtitle *Recovering the Ground* instead, "*Post-Critical Exercises in Recollection*," especially given the subtitles of two of his previous books, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, and *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical*

Investigations. But it is not only the question of why he used the term "critical" that deserves our thoughtful meditation, we might also wonder why he characterized these Polanyian-inspired (at least in part) exercises as "recollections." I have no definitive answers to these questions, but I have given them some thought. In the hope that my reflections might provoke further conversation on these matters, I have collected my mediations and herewith present them for your consideration. The order (or lack thereof) of these meditations reflects the "order" of my re-collection of them. I will start with my speculation regarding the importance that Poteat ascribed to recollection. I will then make some stabs as to what he might have meant by calling these exercises critical.

Recollection and History

As I call back to mind my time with Poteat, as his student and as his friend, but more importantly, and in both cases, as an interlocutor in an ongoing conversation that lasted until his death, I realize just how deeply he shaped my point of view personally and philosophically. I treasure those conversations past; but given these present meditations on his written words, I think of our conversation as not quite over. And, even though his influence goes way deeper than I can explicitly recount, I find myself with a kind of mental album of many of the scenes of our conversations that struck me then (and still do) with Bill's uncanny grasp of what I might call the mystery and majesty of personal existence. My recollection of these scenes brings them back to life in the way that pictures in my vacation album bring back to life places I have visited in the past and loved. Turning the pages of this album is like returning to these places.

All of this suggests to me that recollection is bound up with a backward look, with something past, with something that suggests further, at least with a proper qualification, a sense of returning, or the possibility of it. Or as I might say, the concept of recollection strikes me as a deeply historical concept, like its conceptual cousin, memory.

But of course, recollection need not be a historical concept. It was not for Plato, who built a whole epistemology on its basis. For Plato, recollection (*anamnesis*) takes us back, but not back in our historical lives; rather this return is to a timeless eternity. While neither Poteat nor I are sympathetic to this doctrine, and its companion notion that embodiment is a kind of tragic fall into time, I think we would both gladly embrace the idea that Plato was right to connect recollection to an about face (a turn from darkness to light), or if you will, to conversion. More about this later.

Now I want to connect recollection to Michael Polanyi's notion that consciousness has a "from-to" structure of attention. (Of course, I can't say that Bill made this connection, at least explicitly.) In contrast to the usual focus on the "to" pole of this dialectic, I want to consider what I would call the historical meaning of the "from" pole. It is a

term that has gotten less attention than its dialectical partner "to." The attention that attending "from" has gotten has been mostly via a translation of it into the epistemological or perceptual terms "subsidiary" or "tacit." Something important may get lost in this translation, something that the backward look of recollection may disclose.

First a word about the "to" pole. When "attending to" is interpreted in temporal terms, it is usually the future that is discussed or implied—and rightfully so, because indeed Polanyi was a forward-looking thinker, indeed almost incorrigibly upbeat. He seemed always to be trying to move forward, towards an inexhaustible future, towards a post-critical philosophy. His emphasis was on discovery, something that led Richard Gelwick to entitle his book *The Way of Discovery* and Polanyi Society members to think of themselves as a society of explorers. And indeed, even though the title of this journal is *Tradition & Discovery*, it has focused largely on discovery more than tradition, at least in the sense of recovering the essential role of the historical background in the from-to structure of consciousness.

Gestalt psychology has pointed out that perception necessarily has a background, but it does not associate this with the historical past. Indeed, Polanyi himself tends to follow this perceptual/epistemic focus. But, I do not contend that he completely ignores this, but only that he may not have considered it fully enough. Perhaps Poteat's critical exercises in recollection are designed to restore this historical sense to the "from" element in the "from-to" dialectic of attention. Perhaps he thought that we do not pay enough attention to the fact that we always and necessarily arrive at the present *from* the past, a conceptual fact that inevitably figures in shaping what we come to, which includes what we come to know and what we come to do, and feel, and to value, and to embrace as our own.

Amnesia and the Loss of the World

Recollection, like remembering, just may be the best remedy for the cultural and personal amnesia that Heidegger called forgetfulness. The etiology of this forgetfulness is varied. It may be born of boredom, and/or indifference, or it may reflect a fear that looking back will transform us into a pillar of salt, or that we will be paralyzed by regret, or drown in the pathos of loss. But at the same time, memory keeps us together, that is, keeps us from falling apart, just as recollection re-collects the pivotal scenes of our individual and common human biography that constitute our identity, something psychotherapy knows a lot about. We say that one needs time to collect his emotions, or thoughts or simply, herself, as though we are perpetually subject to falling apart. And while it may not work for Humpty Dumpty, recollection may offer a path to recovery, to recovering the ground, the very ground that has slipped out from under our feet and dis-integrated our lives. Or it seems that Bill Poteat thought so.

Well, what have we forgotten? What have we lost? And in what sense can we get it back? How can exercises in recollection return to us what we have lost? How can it put us back on our feet? Can recollection return us to ourselves? Here we must be very careful not to fall into the trap of nostalgia, that is, into the trap of idealizing a golden past—call this Camelot or Eden. In a moment, I will say more about how recollection, if critical, can avoid such a misconceived aim at recovery. But first, let me say how recollection may restore our souls.

What have we forgotten? Well, many things, but I will focus on what I take to be one such devastating loss. I will call this a loss of the scenes of our common human history. Recollection recalls the scenes of our common historical journey to the present. These are the scenes that remind us of the multitude of practices that have shaped our identity, our shared history, our common human story. Recollections of the scenes of our common history can unmask our pretensions of self-knowledge and overturn the narrow and distorted pictures of ourselves that our culture has imposed on us.

I think that Wittgenstein is a good guide in this process of recollection. In fact, we might take him at his word in thinking of the *Investigations* (1958, ix) as an album, a collection of scenes of our common human form of life. It is as though this album is calling us to an exercise in recollection, an exercise in recalling the shared practices that form our common history as human beings.

He begins the *Investigations* with a scene recounted by St. Augustine regarding how he acquired language. Augustine is recollecting a scene from his own childhood (1958, par. #1). But as he recounts this story he falls prey to a picture of language that reduces it to a collection of names that stand for things. Augustine's account shows how easily our recollections can be distorted. Nevertheless, the fact that Wittgenstein uses this recollection to open his own exercise in recollection about what language is, about how it is acquired, is the important point to emphasize. So in his oblique way, Wittgenstein is telling us that if we want to understand our human form of life, we must go back to trace its beginnings, to recover its contingent historical origins. And for him, the human form of life is defined by the fact that we human beings speak, a fact he describes as a key element in what he calls our "natural history" (Wittgenstein 1958, par. 25). For him, the fact that we speak is in important respects like the fact that we walk, stand upright, laugh, cry, find something funny, some things sad, and some things puzzling, perhaps mysterious.

As each of us developed we learned what it is to play, to be sincere, to be ironic, to find something out, to be surprised, etc. We learned that things have names, we learned to name things, to promise, to lie, and to tell the truth. We listened to stories, pretended to the villains and heroes, and along the way we learned how to use the word "know" and how it has a different grammar than "believe." I would say that these things and many others form the substrate of ordinary life. And I would quickly add:

the differences in the particular content of these scenes of the ordinary form the unique substance of my life and the unique substance of yours; this is where we come from—it is my (our) ground.

But how prone we all are to lose sight of the importance of the fact that each of us has a biography; that we all come *from* some place, *from* some family, *from* some particular culture. How prone we are to forgetting this, to forgetting that our participation in such ordinary practices is the ground of our personal existence. Perhaps one reason we are so often blind to this ground is because we tend to run off into abstraction rather than simply look back. Apart from the embrace of both our common and particular historical background we are in danger of losing our way, of not knowing how to go on. But if it is hard to accept the human form of life, it is perhaps even more difficult to accept the bearing of our common and particular past on all that we do and all that we are; this is especially difficult in a culture that treats the past as gone, as over and done, as though each day were utterly new, a blank slate of opportunity.

Clearly Polanyi would be sympathetic to Wittgenstein in assigning a priority to practice over theory. The crux of Polanyi's argument hinges on recollecting the concrete practices of scientists rather than on advancing second order theoretical accounts as to what really is involved in the employment of the scientific method, accounts that seduce even the scientists themselves into forgetfulness and encourage philosophers of science to continue to distort our picture of science. These accounts are seductive and threaten to blind us to the fact that science is grounded in nothing less than personal judgments, in much the same way that ordinary life is so grounded. Official accounts of the methods of science find such a reliance on the judgments of scientists to be much too fragile, as though science were not as fragile as ordinary life itself, or as art, or as religion. So Polanyi recalls particular examples from his recollections of his own practices as a scientist and recounts stories of discovery that force us to remember that scientists are human beings that share a common history with non-scientists, even philosophers.

Recollecting our practices seems to me more akin to exercises than to philosophical thought experiments. To call a recollection an exercise is to connect it to a bodily practice, somewhat like remembering the times and places I have walked, the people I have walked with, and so forth. An exercise in that respect is like retracing our steps, in the way that Polanyi called on scientists to retrace the steps in their actual practices. Recollection-as-retracing is more concrete than thought experiments insofar as it is an exercise that requires an imaginative bodily participation. An exercise existentially engages us in a way that passive hypothetical observation from the outside does not manage; it situates us existentially in a historical context, or more precisely, in our world. Philosophy is good at constructing such thought experiments, but literature might be better at engaging our participation in these life possibilities. Good stories invite us to walk with its characters and in doing so often provoke our imaginations to

recover our sense of connection to our fellow human beings, something that in turn may occasion the recollection of our own concrete journeys in the world.

The Contingency of History and the Stability of Words

The importance of these last three words, "in the world" can easily be overlooked. In the opening of *Recovering the Ground*, Poteat says that despite the temptation to abstraction and its correlative amnesia, it cannot completely efface the commonplace fact that our lives as persons are inextricably grounded in our "sentient, motile and oriented mindbodies *in the world*" (1994, xii, italics added). If we miss these words "in the world" we might be misled into thinking that the mindbody is simply a metaphysical replacement for the absolute indubitable ground of certainty that Descartes was searching for and professed to find in the *cogito*.

But in fact, the mindbody for Poteat is not a metaphysical ground at all, at least in the sense of being a solid (eternal) ground beyond history, that is, beyond contingency, beyond time, beyond doubt, and immune to forgetfulness and repudiation. We can resist this abstracting tendency if we are vigilant in continually recollecting that the mindbody lives and moves and has its being *in the world*. As Heidegger has reminded us, we are all thrown into this world without our consent. What I take this to mean in part is that my particular mindbody, (as it is for each of us) is constituted within the radical historical contingency of time and place and within a myriad of relations to the others who by chance are the ones who call us forth as the persons we become.

I take it that Poteat is recollecting for us, for himself, this fact, so obvious as to be missed, that we human beings are, as a matter of contingent fact, born at a particular time and place, are called into being, learn to speak, have families, an ancestry, and finally die; in short he is asking us to recollect that we all have a history and that this history is itself rooted in a prehistory. As I might put this, while we need to be vigilant in recollecting that the "to" pole in consciousness is always and of necessity grounded in its "from" correlate, we must also be vigilant in acknowledging that the roots of the mindbody itself extend deeply into its own historical and prehistorical ground.

In modernity, critical philosophy, the scientific naturalism it has spawned, and even certain religious beliefs it has produced, have resisted the inherent instability of radical historical contingency. In some ways this is nothing new. Human beings have always found contingency unsettling. The ancients devised a way of blunting contingency by simply denying it reality and taking refuge in the eternally repeating cycles of nature or in some eternal logos. In modernity, the preferred way to deny contingency is a bit different. When we look more deeply into nature, as scientific naturalism tells us, we will see that there is no contingency to be found: and with a sigh of relief it tells us of its metaphysical discovery that everything is predictable in principle and hence controllable in principle because every event is causally determined. And there are even

religious versions of this metaphysics of determinism wherein God allows nothing to happen by chance.

If I am right that Poteat is urging us to embrace the radical historical contingency of our mindbody existence, how does he propose that we find our way? How can a contingent mindbody serve as a stable ground? How can it give us a place to stand? How can we embrace its inherent contingency without falling into chaos? In seeking to recover the ground, I think he is asking us to consider how the mindbody provides us a sense of stability *within* contingency. He is not suggesting that he has found a new way to achieve this stability *within* contingency, but that recollection will disclose to us that we have already found a way to do this. If we simply look at our ordinary practices we recollect a fact that is so obvious as to be missed in reflection: human mindbodies become persons by entering into the world of speech. For most, this is a matter of course; for others, like Helen Keller, it is nothing short of a miracle.

For Poteat, this historical world, my world, our world, appears in and with, and can only appear in and with the fact that we speak and understand speech. This is the mindbody's unique form of life. As Poteat puts it: "The pre-reflective ground of all meaning, meaning discernment, coherence, and value protends itself within our convivial mindbodily life, issues in language, and is manifest in our every authentic act of speech. The constant pretensive-retrotensive relation to this ground of our acts of speech, the most concrete of all realities, reveals this ground to be concrete…" (Poteat 1994, 4).

Poteat was fond of quoting W.H. Auden who said: "To utter a sentence is to make a world appear" (Poteat 1985, 116). In some ways this is a version of the biblical story of creation. In that story, God speaks the world into existence. How can language do this? We need look no further than to J.L. Austin and to his reminder that speaking can actually bring things into reality. A paradigm of such a creation is the promise. Clearly a promise makes no sense outside of contingency. In a world where so much is possible, we can find a measure of comfort and assurance in the promises we make to each other. We promise to be faithful to a spouse in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and so forth. In the giving and taking of one's word, the possibility of stability arises *within* contingency. Words form the connections we have to one another and to the world. With words we form and enter into covenants, contracts, and agreements; thanks to the fact that we speak, we can and do formulate rules, moral and civic, form traditions and practices that establish continuity in the midst of contingency. Without speech, contingency would be unbearable, even terrifying.

But for some, especially in modernity where skepticism abounds, even speech is not sufficient to establish the stability we crave. As these doubters point out, the process of acquiring speech and trusting it to establish continuity is such a risky business that it is hard to see how the speaking mindbody can offer ground enough to insure stability

in the midst of contingency. But perhaps some recollection is in order here. It might give us more confidence in the power of the mindbody alive in speech to serve as our stabilizing ground if we would simply look back (before reflection) to the concrete practices our words make possible, practices that have long since routinely engaged us and given our lives direction and sense. But again, the difficulty here is that for some this is simply not ground enough.

I think Poteat would agree that there is no deeper or more solid ground to recover than the historically situated speaking mindbody. For him, this is all we need to exist and flourish as persons, nothing more, and nothing less. Nothing else can provide the stability required for finding our way *within* historical contingency. If we would but recollect our pre-reflective practices we might remember this. We might remember that speech is at the very center of what Wittgenstein called our human *form of life*. We might see why Wittgenstein characterizes the elements of this form of life as common lines in the natural history of human beings.

For me, Stanley Cavell has perfectly captured the spirit of our common natural history as follows:

> We learn words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying (Cavell 1976, 52).

Returning Home

For both Wittgenstein and Poteat, if we are to exist and flourish as persons, it is our historically situated form of life that must be recollected and accepted. What both want us to recollect is that, as persons, our speaking-mindbody-in-the-world is our primordial home, a home we have never completely left, a home that always beckons us. As Poteat puts it, this primordial home "contains the objects and relations upon which I have left my personal stamp, expressed my idiosyncrasy, part of my unique history; it

is the place where all the goals I seek, all of the objects of my personal fulfillment, all the ends of my personal moral action are. It is the place where all my griefs have their habitation" (Poteat 1994, 79).

This brings to my mind a remark that Wittgenstein once made: "When philosophers use a word—'knowledge', 'being', 'object; 'I', 'proposition', 'name'—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (1958, par. #116).

What I get from this is Wittgenstein's idea that philosophy, indeed the whole of modern culture shaped by it, has seduced us into a strange forgetfulness of the actual world we live in prior to the second order accounts available to us, pictures of it that hold us captive. We tend to lay down conditions in advance as to what our words must mean, or name, and forget the actual occasions of their use. So we need a good dose of recollection to bring us back to the way we actually speak, to the meanings that words bear in the specific contexts of their use. These occasions of use form the original home of these words. This original home is the actual historical context in which we came to be the speakers of these words.

What I like to think Wittgenstein is suggesting is that philosophy is, perhaps has always been, afflicted with a condition of homesickness, a condition that drives the search for a home completely safe from the ravages of contingency. And for Wittgenstein and Poteat, however, there is no such home. So if we are to find our home, it can only be found in accepting our embodied existence in the here and now of our actual world. But, if we can accept it, accept our human form of life as home, it can prove to be ground enough to support and sustain our lives together.

But alas for some, especially philosophers, such an exercise in recollection will not satisfy the persistent metaphysical craving for a firmer ground, a ground that transcends the concrete historical actuality. As Bill knew very well, it will take an enormous and sustained effort to find our way back to this home and accept it as such. Exercises in recollection may serve to show us the way, but it will not be easy. Recollection is not just a matter of looking back, it is a challenge to bring us back to it, to return its significance to our lives. It will require going against the grain of a culture prone to metaphysical flight and seduced by the pressure, especially from certain religious circles, to transcend the contingency of our historical actuality.

Post-Critical Criticism

So at last, I turn to the question I raised at the beginning. Why did Poteat call these exercises in recollection "critical" rather than "post-critical"? Perhaps he was simply alerting us to the fact that being post-critical does not mean ceasing to be critical. Quite

the contrary! Indeed, we must not forget that Poteat, Polanyi, and Wittgenstein were all critics of modern culture in general and modern philosophy in particular.

The post-critical critic, however, operates on the basis of a logic that is different than the logic of the critical critic. Post-critical logic accepts the primordial fact that our human access to reality (things, others, ourselves, nature, God) is grounded in nothing more and nothing less than the conversations and activities of embodied persons existentially engaged in the world. Critical logic on the other hand aims to take persons out of the loop when it comes to our access to, and understanding of, reality.

This is the ironic position of Kant, that most critical of critical philosophers. In showing how human beings inevitably shape perception and thought and so construct reality, he erected a barrier between humans and way things really are, what he called things-in-themselves. And since then, critical philosophy, armed with its uncritical acceptance of Kant's presumption to place reality (things-in-themselves) off limits to human beings, has vacillated between searching for a way to get persons out of the way (scientific naturalism) and just resigning itself to skepticism, to our inevitable and unbridgeable separation from things as they really are (existential despair).

So then what makes an exercise in recollection critical? And why did Poteat think it important to keep our recollections critical in this process of recovering the ground? What Poteat might be warning against is a particular form of being un-critical in our recollections, what I would call nostalgia. As I think of it, nostalgia looks back in a mood of despair. I imagine for example, that no future or past person could ever find what I found in my unique past experience. In nostalgia, the pain of this backward look into my own past generates a pathos of loss that encloses me in my own private world, isolates me, and eclipses the important fact that my past experiences are open to others to understand and to share. As I might put it, nostalgia is un-critical of critical philosophy's presumption that we have no access to other "minds." Without denying my uniqueness, my separateness, post-critical criticism recollects our commonness, call this our shared human past. It is this recollection that reminds me not only of where I am from, my past, but where we all are from, our common form of life, our ancestral home. To return to this home in recollection is to acknowledge that we always carry its imprint in every step forward. (I wonder: did Plato know in some sense that our ancestors were cave dwellers?)

Critical recollection is also vigilant in keeping its look back from distorting the past into an idealized Eden. A moment's critical reflection will make it clear to us that life in that state of innocence is not a life to which we would like to return. Do we really want to return to ignorance, to a state of childhood in which we do not know we are naked, to a state prior to knowing the difference between good and evil, to a state in which we know nothing of our mortality? Critical recollection will have none of this;

rather, it stands ready to put away childish tendencies to imagine our prehistory as a state of paradise.

And yet, critical recollection does invite us to remember what we might call the spirit of childlike trust and acceptance, the spirit of excitement and joy in life itself. While this spirit of youth might be wasted on the young, it is not beyond our capacity to reconnect to it in our adult life. We often do this in our relation to the children we have or know, children we invite into our lives and who invite us into theirs. Without it, we are simply old; without it we are threatened with cynicism. Critical recollection is aware of the differences between childlikeness and childishness and invites us to renew our acceptance of the role that childlike faith and faithfulness as indispensable components required for the conduct of our ordinary lives. Wittgenstein is right, I think, that we could not have acquired language apart from the childhood scenes of instruction of the sort that Augustine recollected.

The Need for Conversion

I want to say a word about conversion, about the importance of an about-face, a word about how turning back can provoke such a turning around. As is well known, Wittgenstein experienced such a turning around, as did Heidegger, and as did Poteat. As recorded in *Polanyian Meditations*, Poteat recounts what he calls his orphic dismemberment (Poteat 1985, 7). This happened in Athens and it was provoked by a sculptor Evangelos Moustatkas, or more precisely, by the things he sculptured. His encounter with this man and these things, produced Poteat's conversion, his radical turn around. It was preceded by a fall, or a falling apart, but it prepared the way for re-collecting his life, his life's project. In these moments Poteat seems to realize that he had to turn himself around because the categories that had guided him had become ineffectual and he had gotten lost in the very intellectual presumptions of modernity he was intent on overturning. Instead, he himself was overturned. How did this happen? How did this turn provoke Poteat's interest in recollection?

As I said earlier, it was Kant who put things, at least things in themselves, off limits to human understanding. I think that what happened to Poteat was that he underwent a change of heart, a radical conversion, a change provoked by the presence of the spirit that was present in the material things that were shaped into form by the hands of Moustakas. We might say it provoked a revised understanding of his relation to things, to the world, indeed to his own body. In these moments of conversion, these things that Moustakas had formed, these things in themselves, were not beyond Poteat's touch, his sight, his understanding. These things betokened for him the finitude of the world, his own finitude that he had forgotten.

And naturally he had to possess some of these things. He collected a number of them and placed them around him in the way that we all collect and keep things that

provoke our recollections, keep forgetfulness at bay, and bring the world near. Poteat had found a new way of gathering things together, including his own dismembered self. His exercises in recollection are, I believe, designed to invite a similar change of heart in his readers. I see these exercises as his invitation into a renewed relation to the world—a world which we have never fully left behind but too often have been seduced into forgetting.

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