



REVIEW ARTICLES

Dale W. Cannon and Ronald L. Hall, eds. *Recovering the Personal: the Philosophical Anthropology of William H. Poteat*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. 219 + vii. ISBN 978-1-4985-4094-0. \$85.00.

PERSONHOOD IN A POTEATIAN, POST-CRITICAL VEIN

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ABSTRACT

This well-organized collection invites us to engage Poteat's post-critical understanding of personhood. The essays on philosophical anthropology call us to responsible personhood as they focus on various topics, including Poteat's teaching, the meaning of post-critical and how and when we should think critically, and the importance of place. The three essays engaging theology share a theme of our grounding through our embodiment in a relational, incarnational world. The final two essays, the last by Poteat, focus on Cézanne's paintings as a thick material and mental enactive mindbodily process, in which the paintings "think themselves" in Cézanne and in the viewer.

This collection of essays—primarily drawn from the 2014 conference “The Primacy of Persons: the Intellectual Legacy of William H. Poteat,” and divided into three sections (Philosophical Anthropology, Theological Considerations, and Aesthetic Considerations)—is well organized as a whole, as are the individual contributions. There is much to commend in each of these essays, so this review can only touch on some of their strengths. Polanyi scholars will find much of interest in Poteat’s development and expansion of Polanyi’s work, and those engaged in scholarship on Poteat’s work itself will also find this book richly rewarding.

In the introductory chapter, the editors Dale Cannon and Ronald Hall succinctly set out what they take to be the most salient points the various essays attempt to make. Following that, Bruce Haddox and Edward St. Clair paint a portrait of Poteat as a teacher and a mentor who took a very personal approach to those roles. Haddox relates an incident that archetypically displays the post-critical and personal approach Poteat employed. Indeed, Haddox seemed to set himself up perfectly for a Poteatian encounter. Being called upon to identify himself, Haddox responded in an impersonal analytical philosophical manner. To this, Poteat reacted with a long silence and finally queried, “Haddox? Is that who you really are?” (12). I believe all of us who engaged in the classroom with Poteat and his philosophical anthropology were invited and (willingly) compelled to grapple with who each of us was as a responsible human being.

Dale Cannon neatly summarizes various uses of the term “post-critical” and hits the mark when he says being post-critical means acknowledging and accrediting “the fiduciary foundations of our knowledge...and our reliance upon the traditions and languages” of our “apprenticeships” and as recognizing “the priority in reasoned enquiry of methodological faith and trust to methodological doubt and suspicion” (27). Cannon also rightly locates the historical context of post-critical thinking as absolutely critical (pun intended): it represents a reaction to the critical models of thinking formulated most influentially by Descartes and Kant, indeed, a hoped-for paradigm shift (24-25). Cannon notes that both Polanyi and Poteat distinguish the pre-critical from the post-critical (24), and suggests it is appropriate for a post-critical thinker to be critical “in a different way” (31-32). In this context he includes a valuable quotation from Poteat’s *Recovering the Ground*: “Criticism is the tacit, mindbodily recognition of incoherence in the course of my quest of coherence. This criticism is incessantly being carried out instantaneously [i.e., pre-reflectively]” (32). While not disagreeing with Poteat and Cannon here, I would suggest that the particularities of when to be critical in contexts where some find it possible to be (more or less) pre-critical become quite complicated. In deciding, for example, the truth of certain scientific and historical claims and how these may square with the truth of scripture and tradition for a religious believer makes it impossible to be a totally “innocent” pre-critical believer. Reflective thinking of some sort becomes requisite in one’s quest for coherence—even for the fundamentalist who wants to remain pre-critical. We can also refer to traditions of racism, sexism, and other alleged “isms,” to which many of us would find it appropriate to apply critical and reflective reason. Would it be a worthwhile project to suggest guidelines for when the post-critical thinker needs to be critical, or is this something that needs to be decided piecemeal?

Ronald Hall invites us to “critically recollect” our history and pre-history. By “pre-history” I take Hall to be referring to the human history that we have not immediately or directly experienced, yet which crucially forms us and informs us in our personal

circumstances. I agree with Hall that the responsible person needs to own that history and its contingency. My own understanding of “pre-history” is slightly different than Hall’s: I think of it in terms of the pre-linguistic, pre-reflective dimensions of the human mindbody (that have evolved for us as a species) that not only underlie our language, but remain part of the cohesion and meaningfulness of human life even after we have acquired language. While agreeing with Hall on the centrality of language for human culture and history and rejecting with him nostalgia for a state of animal or childhood innocence (56), I regard the non-linguistic dimensions of our human mindbodies as sharing with speech “the possibility of [providing] stability... *within* contingency” (53). So the following declaration by Hall seems to overstate the case: “Without speech, contingency would be unbearable, even terrifying” (53). I do not believe that animal life and human infant life are normally “unbearable.” Hall also somewhat overdraws our radical historical contingency: he cites Heidegger’s notion of being thrown into this world (52), which seems to contrast with Poteat’s focus on our feeling at home in the world when we live from our mindbodily integrity. Yet I agree with Hall that our culture (and probably each of us as individuals) tends to crave certainty, when instead we should recollect “the spirit of childlike trust and acceptance” in the midst of life’s radical contingency, as did Bill Poteat.

In writing about “The Primacy of Persons,” David Rutledge effectively conveys modernity’s displacement of persons and the loss of a sense of place. He catalogues from literature—Auden, Donne, Kafka, Riesman, Salinger, Sartre, Dostoevsky, and Camus—depictions of the alienation, anxiety, despair, and “restless passion” that stem from this loss (74). He traces the epistemological and ontological roots of this displacement especially to the exteriorization of space revealed artistically in art of the Italian Renaissance and philosophically in Descartes’ doubting individual *cogito* that relies upon mathematical rationality. Rutledge shows a knack for enlisting some of Poteat’s most characteristic and striking quotations, including: 1) “Persons have places” (73; *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture*, 33); 2) “It is the perennial temptation of critical thought to demand total explicitness in all things, to bring all background into foreground, to dissolve the tension between the focal and the subsidiary by making everything focal” (72; *Primacy of Persons*, 261); 3) “In my mother’s womb, within which her beating heart rhythmically pumps the blood of life through my foetal body, forming itself toward my primal initiation into the very foundation of my first and most primitive cosmos” (78; *Polanyian Meditations*, 22-23).

Ronald Hall argues convincingly that, while Polanyi’s focus was clearly and chiefly epistemological, Poteat went beyond Polanyi with a primary focus on ontology and anthropology. He pithily characterizes modern epistemology and ontology: “modernity has given us a picture of ourselves as ghosts in machines, and ultimately as machines” (86-87). A nice touch is his recognition of Romanticism as held captive to modern

dualism, or at least to one of its poles. Romanticism counters the Enlightenment split of reason over emotion, but Hall notes its “assault(s) on the adequacy of ordinary speech, preferring music, or language-as-lyrical-poetry to express spirit’s transcendence” (97). While it lies all in parentheses, I do take issue with one paragraph, where Hall finds “mind-body” more accurate (though less forceful) than Poteat’s “mindbody.” There he describes our minds as “distinct but inseparable from our bodies.” For me, our phenomenal bodies are not clearly distinct from mind; a psychosomatic unity pertains where my bodily acts are conscious, intentional, and meaningful. I also demur from Hall’s description in the same paragraph of Poteat’s quote “muscles make assumptions” as “unhappy” (94). Though metaphorical here, Poteat I believe accurately expressed the meaningful tacit role of our bodies in activities like playing the piano or tennis.

Although Poteat was seldom explicitly theological beyond his early career, the next three chapters fruitfully explore some of the theological possibilities in Poteat’s work. James Stines examines how Poteat overcomes Cartesianism through engaging Kierkegaard. This entails a reversal of the Cartesian *cogito*, from “I think, therefore I am” to “I am, therefore I think” (111). The person who is in Christ will refuse dualism and related monisms and instead “condescend to God’s vulnerability, to God’s embodiment, to Incarnation, to real presence, to the enacted ‘I’” (107). I would caution that much of human sinfulness has little to do with the reflective mind in relation to God and much to do with pre-reflective selfishness.

Elizabeth Newman nicely captures the modern and postmodern loss of place with a comparison of Poteat’s negative experience of a shopping mall as involving nothing particular and personal with Steve Jobs’ celebration of the sameness of malls around the world. She invokes the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to counter the restlessness and inability to feel at home in the world under the modern picture of humanity. This picture inverts creation *ex nihilo* with the belief “that we create ourselves out of nothing: no prior history, story, or tradition is necessary, much less our own created being in the world” (121). Even as the early church used the doctrine to counter Gnostic understandings of the world and humanity, Newman invokes the tradition to affirm the goodness of embodied or incarnational being in the world.

Melvin Keiser begins his chapter with an analysis of Pascal’s and H. Richard Niebuhr’s influence on Poteat (130-36), and ends with a call to attend “to feeling in the depths of my tacit dimension” (144). Keiser notes a passage in “Persons and Places” (41) which struck me and strikes Keiser as uncharacteristic of Poteat’s project as a whole: “The incarnation faith deprives a man of his place in nature, in the city, in historical memory, in order to give him a place before the Lord” (138). Keiser argues that Poteat did not adequately draw upon Pascal at this point, as “incarnation here would seem to be no longer the divine dwelling in us as we dwell bodily in the world but a means to stand before God beyond the world” (138). Newman in her essay

includes a counter Poteatian quote: “Nature is indeed our mother” (123). And Keiser counts that Poteat fifteen times in *Recovering the Ground* refers to Paul’s characterization of God as “[that] in which I/we live and move and have my/our being” (137, 145), which is music to the ears of this professed panentheist. In our grounding in our mindbodily orientation to the world we are at the same time grounded in God. One may discern a polarity, or better a complementarity, in Poteat’s theology between God as person, relatively transcendent, who speaks to or in us, and God as more transpersonal and immanent, experienced “in Silence,” a term and practice Keiser invokes from his Quaker heritage (142-43).

As Cannon and Hall suggest in their introductory chapter, Kieran Cashell’s “Post-Critical Aesthetics” is in some ways the most original essay in the collection to comment on Poteat’s project. Cashell demonstrates impressive breadth and depth in his knowledge of contemporary theory of aesthetics and art. Tellingly, Cashell relates Poteat’s conversation with Moustakas, whose *Alexander the Great* sculpture is pictured on the cover of the book and which became the occasion for Poteat’s “Orphic dismemberment.” Regarding his sculpture *Bird in Flight*, Moustakas speaks about his imagination as a mental state, as if he implemented an idea in his head through a more or less incidental medium. Poteat however sees imagination, to use Cashell’s words, as “irreducibly physical and mental,” “intertwining the margins of body and material finally into a Mobius strip of vital, reflexively interconnecting forms” (159). Cashell analyzes at length why Cézanne captured the interest of Merleau-Ponty and in turn Poteat. At bottom “for Poteat and Merleau-Ponty before him, Cézanne’s art represents an instance of phenomenology articulated through the pictorial medium of painting” (162), where thought, perception, feeling, bodily action, and materiality are not separated but mutually shape an enactive process. Cashell engages many thinkers on Cézanne’s uniqueness in terms of the tactile nature of his paintings, their dynamic nature, the absence of linear perspective and related conventions, and the tension between the subject of a painting and its materiality as medium. Cashell argues that Poteat’s unique contribution to this conversation lies in his insight that “the paintings *think* themselves in us in an analogous manner to the trees, river, mountain, boulders, and apples that dwell in the painter’s ‘mindbodily’ sentience and imagination when he positioned himself at the optimum place to experience them” (172). Cashell suggests this insight should not be interpreted as saying we duplicate the artist’s experience, but rather become aware of our own mindbodily engagement with reality when we allow Cézanne’s paintings to “think themselves in us” (172).

It is fitting that this book concludes with a piece by Poteat himself, apparently the last one he wrote and the one Cashell engages. Also appropriately, even as Poteat regarded Renaissance painting as signaling an ultimately insane picture of ourselves and the world, this final piece by Poteat concerns how Cézanne’s painting signals the

reversal of that picture. Near the beginning Poteat heralds this reversal: “The weight and plenitude of the landscapes and still lifes imparted by the shadow of Cézanne’s mindbodily presence in the world is there as well for anyone who will behold and be beholden to them, if he/she will but wait until the painting ‘thinks itself in [him/her]’” (189). This piece includes perspicuous analysis and criticism of linear perspective and its relatives in terms of Western artistic and intellectual history. It concludes with analysis of some of Cézanne’s works and words relative to materializing sensations or perceptions, to touching the real through his mindbodily presence in and to the world. A portion of Poteat’s closing paragraph admirably summarizes the significance of Cézanne’s work for Poteat’s own project:

We become active participants in a world comprised of Paul Cézanne, his palette, his brushes, his brush strokes and his world; we are incorporate—not only, not even primarily, through our sense of sight, but with all the sensory and meaning-discerning powers of our mindbodies—in his *own* embodiment of the numinous power of the Real. With a single apple he strikes through the mask of modern subjectivism to the very Ground of the world (201).