

## Marcel and the Philosophy of Place<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* This essay explores some resources Gabriel Marcel offers for describing and cultivating an attuned, responsive relationship to place. Taking a brief passage in “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy” as its departure point, it explores how some of Marcel’s key concepts—ontological exigence, *disponibilité* and creative fidelity—might be reinterpreted in this regard. It also draws on writings about place by some Marcelian kindred spirits, namely Henry Bugbee, Walker Percy, William Desmond, and Wendell Berry.

“Being as the Place of Fidelity.”  
—Gabriel Marcel<sup>2</sup>

In the 2018 issue of *Marcel Studies*, Geoffrey Karabin and Brendan Sweetman interview Thomas Busch. In one question, they ask him if Marcel offers an “adequate account of nature.”<sup>3</sup> Busch responds that Marcel had “very little [to say] about the natural world” and mainly focused on “‘depth’ in human relationships.”<sup>4</sup> Still, Busch claims, what Marcel did say was suggestive. Busch points to Marcel’s essay on Rainer Maria Rilke, where he praises the poet’s “reverence for things.”<sup>5</sup> Busch also points to “Life and the Sacred,” where Marcel reflects on his experiences of the sacred in the natural world and especially at “sacred groves in Japan.”<sup>6</sup> In both essays, Marcel sees dire consequences in the modern reduction of the natural world to mere resource, in the loss of reverence this entails. Busch suggests, then, that there are passages in Marcel that offer promising ecological affordances.<sup>7</sup> Taking up Busch’s suggestion, this essay uses a passage

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, translated by Kathleen Farrer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Karabin and Brendan Sweetman, “Tom Busch Interview,” *Marcel Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2018): 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 244. On the resources Marcel offers for a richer account of things, see Kenneth Schmitz, *The Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2005), especially pp. 106-127.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, translated by Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> See also Sally Fischer’s suggestive essay “Reading Marcel’s Philosophy of Dialogical Inter-subjectivity in a Contemporary Light” in *Living Existentialism: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Busch*, edited by Gregory

in “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy” to launch an inquiry into the resources Marcel offers for describing and cultivating an attuned, responsible relationship to place. Using this passage as its touchstone, it reinterprets some of Marcel’s key concepts—ontological exigence, *disponibilité* and creative fidelity—in relation to place.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the American philosopher Henry Bugbee has already shown the promise of Marcel’s thought in this regard. Bugbee befriended Marcel and visited with him in both the United States and Europe. They saw each other as kindred spirits. Both were committed to a concrete, personal philosophy. Both were concerned with opening oneself to being in its depth. Many of the entries in Bugbee’s *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* are meditations on place. In one entry, Bugbee writes:

During my years of graduate study before the war I studied philosophy in the classroom and at a desk, but my philosophy took shape mainly on foot. It was truly peripatetic, engendered not merely while walking, but *through* walking that was essentially a *meditation of the place*...I weighed everything by the measure of the slight presence of things, clarified in the racing clouds, clarified by the cry of hawks, solidified in the presence of rocks, spelled syllable by syllable by waters of manifold voice, and consolidated in the act of taking steps, each step a meditation steeped in reality.<sup>9</sup>

Bugbee’s is not the thought of an abstracted mind. It is embodied thought, shaped in dynamic interchange with his “place.” Edward Mooney claims, “We might say that Bugbee sees human beings as alert among radiant particulars, infused by care, answerable to a call, and underway, richly immersed in practices and place.”<sup>10</sup> Henry David Thoreau ambles with Bugbee in this passage, but Marcel does as well. Recall that for Marcel humans are always in a concrete situation and always in relationship. Recall too Marcel’s claim that philosophy should attend to this. In passages like this one, Bugbee offers such a philosophy, one formed and informed by the concrete particulars of his walks in wild nature.<sup>11</sup>

Bugbee cites Marcel with approval throughout *The Inward Morning*. He draws on Marcel’s accounts of hope and *disponibilité*, for instance, and on Marcel’s critique of Kantian autonomy. In one telling comment, though, Bugbee finds Marcel’s thought wanting:

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Hoskins and J.C. Berendzen (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2017), pp. 24-44. Fischer notes some other affordances for ecological concern in this study of Marcel’s “ethics of care.”

<sup>8</sup> In a loose sense, we might consider this an inquiry in the “phenomenology of place.” As John Gatta explains, this term “has lately gained currency in the emergent, transdisciplinary field of place-studies.” Gatta defines the phenomenology of place as the “bodily, dynamic interplay between human selves and their setting or dwelling which constitutes our lived experience of emplacement.” See *Spirits of Place in American Literary Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2018), p. 3. For a classic work within place studies, see Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977). Edward Casey is also an important figure within the philosophy of place. See *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993). For recent scholarship, see Janet Donohoe (ed.) *Place and Phenomenology*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1999), p. 139. *The Inward Morning* was first published in 1958.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Mooney, “Introduction: Philosophy in Wilderness” in Bugbee, *The Inward Morning*, p. xi.

<sup>11</sup> Mooney writes that Bugbee’s wilderness “embraces Marcel’s availability to necessary others and Wordsworth’s walking, recollective meditations of the place.” *Ibid.*, p. xx.

Things exist in their own right; it is a lesson that escapes us except as they hold us in awe. Except we stand on the threshold of the wilderness, knowingly, how can our position be true, how can essential truth be enacted in our hearts? Here is what I miss most in the thought of Marcel—the wilderness theme.<sup>12</sup>

The “wilderness theme” does not primarily mean wilderness in our usual sense of the word—say, the swamps, mountains, and trout streams that Bugbee loved—though it certainly enfoldes that sense. The “wilderness theme” means the world of nonhuman nature broadly, which Bugbee conceives as always “wild”—as always remaining mysterious, as always remaining other—even in cases where humans often treat it as domesticated. Bugbee claims reality itself is a wilderness in this sense.<sup>13</sup> In this passage Bugbee suggests that Marcel does not give enough attention to the “wildness” of nonhuman nature.

For his part, Marcel happily conceded that Bugbee discovered new possibilities in his ideas and that he learned much from the younger philosopher. He suggested that Bugbee’s attention to “wilderness” was particularly important in this regard. In the introduction he wrote for *The Inward Morning*, Marcel notes, “Starting from an experience quite different from mine and undeniably more intimately involved with nature, the American philosopher comes into harmony with what I have formerly written of contemplation.”<sup>14</sup> Bugbee’s student Gary Whited recalls a visit to Marcel’s Paris apartment and how Marcel was “emphatic about the importance of the ‘place’ from which one’s philosophy emerges. ‘Sartre’s philosophy,’ Marcel quipped, ‘comes from a sidewalk cafe, while Bugbee’s comes from beside a trout stream.’”<sup>15</sup> Marcel

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<sup>12</sup> Bugbee, *The Inward Morning*, p. 164. This passage comes immediately after Bugbee quotes the closing lines of the final chapter of *Moby-Dick* (a brief epilogue follows in Melville’s novel): “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” Bugbee says this passage, and the novel as a whole, is “an articulate introduction into the presence of things in their finality” (p. 163). His interest in this passage shows that there is nothing blithe in Bugbee’s approach to “wilderness.”

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Conway helpfully explains that there are two senses of “wilderness” at work in Bugbee’s philosophy: “On the one hand, Bugbee regularly appeals to a sense of wilderness that resonates familiarly with popular appreciations of the North American Western frontier. Readers are likely to find themselves very much at home in the wilderness settings he so eloquently describes and in the yearnings for spiritual communion they evoke. On the other hand, Bugbee also trades on a sense of wilderness that bespeaks a distinctly Eastern provenance and sensibility. This sense of wilderness discloses reality as a depthless mystery, which calls to us and conveys the unresolved fluency of our existence. This latter sense of wilderness is likely to strike many readers as foreign, especially since Bugbee does not exclusively associate it with places and spaces that are typically recognized as ‘wild.’” “The Wilderness of Henry Bugbee,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2003): 259.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel, “Introduction” in *The Inward Morning*, p. 26. Marcel did not claim to be the only or the decisive influence on Bugbee’s thought. As one would expect, he points first to Bugbee’s own experiences, including his time at sea on a Navy ship during World War II. In terms of other intellectual influences, Marcel notes Zen Buddhism and the “mysticism of Meister Eckhart” (p. 24). Throughout *The Inward Morning*, Bugbee also repeatedly references Henry David Thoreau, Alfred North Whitehead, D. T. Suzuki (whom he befriended at Harvard), and Paul Tillich. He frequently draws on literature as well.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Whited, “Henry Bugbee as Mentor” in Edward Mooney (ed.) *Wilderness and the Heart: Henry Bugbee’s Philosophy of Place, Presence, and Memory* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1999), p. 238. In his introduction to the University of Georgia Press edition of *The Inward Morning*, Mooney tells of how Marcel arranged for Bugbee to meet Martin Heidegger in 1955. “Perhaps curious to test a young Harvard professor’s footing,” Mooney writes, “Heidegger inquired how one *starts* to think profoundly. What occasion prompts philosophical reflection? He no

means this contrast to be favorable to Bugbee, suggesting his intimate engagement with the natural world.

This essay's main goal is not to trace the influence of Marcel on Bugbee or to examine the importance of place in Bugbee's philosophy. In these regards, I refer readers to the work of scholars like Mooney, Daniel Conway, and David Rodick.<sup>16</sup> This essay instead uses one passage in Marcel to launch a limited exploration of the affordances he offers for a "phenomenology of place." Bugbee will still figure in the inquiry to come, though, as will other Marcelian kindred spirits like Walker Percy, William Desmond, and Wendell Berry.

The touchstone for this essay is a brief passage in Marcel's "An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy." In this passage Marcel juxtaposes two different relationships to a hypothetical place that illustrate his central contrast between "having" and "being."<sup>17</sup> Marcel first imagines himself as an extended visitor to a place. He imagines this visitor as one who ultimately cannot move beyond an encounter structured by "having," an encounter where he seeks to tick off all the sights and experiences that the place has to offer:

For some time I have been in a place whose resources at first seemed to me to be inexhaustible; bit by bit, however, I have gone through all the streets, seen all the 'places of interest,' and now I am overcome with a certain impatience, boredom, and distaste. I feel as if I were in prison. The place where I was staying was one where a certain number of experiences were to be had, and these experiences have already transpired.<sup>18</sup>

Despite good intentions, even this sensitive visitor has ultimately "come there only to increase what I have with a certain number of additional properties."<sup>19</sup> The place is approached as something to appropriate or even consume.

Marcel contrasts this visitor with "anyone who has lived [in the place] for a number of years" and who has come to participate "in its life and in what it contains of what is inexpressible and therefore impossible to exhaust."<sup>20</sup> For such a person, "a certain living relationship has grown up between him and this place, this region, which I should like to call a creative

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doubt anticipated a flat American response. Yet he found his question returned in a Socratic reversal. Bugbee simply asked, echoing a Basho haiku, Could the sound of a fish leaping to a fly at dawn suffice?" (p. xi-xii).

<sup>16</sup> See Mooney, *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell* (London: Continuum, 2009); Conway, "The Wilderness of Henry Bugbee"; and David Rodick, *Gabriel Marcel and American Philosophy: The Religious Dimension of Experience* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017). See also the essays collected in *Wilderness and the Heart*. For a brief overview, see Michael Palmer, "Conversation Partners: Gabriel Marcel and Henry Bugbee," *Marcel Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2018): 53-54.

<sup>17</sup> Marcel does not explicitly use the language of having and being in this passage, but it clearly reflects and illustrates that distinction. Brian Treanor explains the distinction between being and having in relation to otherness: "While the encounter with otherness takes place in terms of assimilation when speaking of having, the encounter with otherness (e.g., other persons) can also take place on the level of being. In this case Marcel maintains that the encounter is not one that is purely external and, as such, it is played out in terms of presence and participation rather than assimilation." See "Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, March 3, 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcel/>

<sup>18</sup> Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, translated by Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964), p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

interchange.”<sup>21</sup> The relationship here is not one of “having” but of “being.” It does not seek merely to appropriate or consume an experience but to continue a “creative interchange” that continually renews itself.

Marcel’s hypothetical visitor in “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy” shows that “having” need not entail explicit exploitation, such as clearcutting a forest or running a puppy mill. “Having” is readily evident in such examples, but it is also subtly present in Marcel’s well-intentioned visitor, a visitor who clearly wishes to appreciate the place rather than exploit it. We should not, of course, elide the very significant differences between these sorts of “having,” but it is important to note that the visitor’s desire to appreciate the place is still structured by consumption.<sup>22</sup> The place has a certain number of desirable qualities to appreciate, to appropriate. Once they have been appreciated/appropriated, boredom and even distaste can set in.

The novelist and philosopher Walker Percy, who was deeply influenced by Marcel, explores a similar dynamic in his 1958 essay “The Loss of the Creature.”<sup>23</sup> Percy begins by imagining the wonder that García López de Cárdenas must have experienced when he “discovered” the Grand Canyon. Cárdenas “crosses miles of desert, breaks through the mesquite, and there it is at [his] feet.” He must have been “amazed at the sight.”<sup>24</sup> Percy contrasts Cárdenas with a contemporary “man in Boston” who decides to go on vacation to the Grand Canyon. This man “visits his travel bureau, looks at the folder, signs up for a two-week tour.”<sup>25</sup> When he gets there, Percy argues, he is unlikely to be awed by the canyon. He will instead hold his perception of the canyon up against the pictures he saw in the folder or on a postcard. The experience has been thoroughly mediated for him by a “symbolic complex” formed in his mind long before he arrives at the canyon, a complex which the tourist packaging of the park itself in turn affirms and deepens.<sup>26</sup> Percy claims that the “sightseer’s satisfaction, is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex.”<sup>27</sup> Percy holds that the sightseer will begin snapping pictures upon arriving at the Grand Canyon: “At the end of forty years of preformulation and with the Grand Canyon yawning at his feet, what does he do? He waives his right of seeing and knowing and records

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that Marcel assumes the first person when describing the hypothetical visitor. Marcel writes, “I have to admit against my will that I too have tended to behave during my life like a collector.” See *Creative Fidelity*, p. 71. Perhaps he is also suggesting that we all have been profoundly shaped by relationships of “having.” Either way, he avoids a simple indictment of the visitor. He notes, for instance, that the tendency to be a “collector” has one key root in an “awareness of time which passes, of the irrevocable; life is short, first this and then that, must be obtained.” *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Walker Percy, “The Loss of the Creature” in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, 2000), pp. 46-63. This essay was first published in 1958, the same year as Bugbee’s *The Inward Morning*. On Percy and Marcel, see John Zeugner, “Walker Percy and Gabriel Marcel: The Castaway and the Wayfarer,” *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1974-75): 21-53. See also Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel’s Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy’s Novels* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1990). Place is often a major concern in Percy’s writings. See Patrick L. Connelly, “‘There Must Be a Place’: Walker Percy and the Philosophy of Place” in Leslie Marsh (ed.) *Walker Percy, Philosopher* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 197-213.

<sup>24</sup> Walker Percy, “The Loss of the Creature,” p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* There is perhaps irony in Percy calling his hypothetical tourist a “sightseer.” His sightseer never really sees the “site” itself.

symbols for the next forty years.”<sup>28</sup> Percy concludes that the sightseer is “a consumer of a prepared experience.”<sup>29</sup> Percy’s account of his hypothetical sightseer is at least loosely consonant with Marcel’s account of his hypothetical visitor. In both cases the place is something to be appropriated or consumed.

Percy’s example is an extreme one, of course. Few places have been as mediated by a “preformed symbolic complex” as the Grand Canyon. But Percy’s essay and Marcel’s example in “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy” suggest that such a stance might be hard to shake no matter where one goes on vacation or visits. We might still be conditioned by the stance of “having,” by a tendency to consume or appropriate. This tendency is perhaps even more pronounced in the age of the smartphone, with its constant temptation to snap pictures and take videos. The smart phone can be a nearly constant mediation, a screen that effectively screens what is before us.

In recent years, young adults’ spending has shifted away from material goods and toward “experiences”: concerts, classes, trips. Media outlets have made much of this shift, sometimes claiming it as evidence that rising generations are less materialistic. Marcel and Percy suggest that we should be cautious, though, about reading this shift as a radical transformation, especially when it is still framed in the language of consumption—people are “buying” experiences. And in the age of social media, it is possible that the desire is not to experience so much as to be seen experiencing. In one news story on this shift, Uptin Saiidi writes, “A lot of millennials’ motivation has to do with distributing photos of themselves on social media. The Harris Poll found that factors such as a craving for recognition (for example, how many likes someone gets on their Instagram post), and a ‘fear of missing out’ help drive millennials’ cravings for experiences.”<sup>30</sup> The driving motivation may be less the experience itself than its curation on social media and the recognition that is sought.

Another claim frequently attends coverage of this shift, though: people tend to find experiences more satisfying than things. A number of studies have suggested that this is the case.<sup>31</sup> I suspect that we should not brush this second claim away and that we should therefore avoid characterizing this shift univocally as consumerist “having” in a different form. The point here is not to dig into the sociological data but to allow such studies to nudge us into considering a range of possibilities. Perhaps the satisfaction of “experiences” is not just the satisfaction of acquisitive desire but, at least some of the time, a fulfilment related to “being” rather than “having.” It is also likely that we are dealing more in gradations and in a number of possibilities. There are hints of this in Marcel’s well-intentioned visitor. The visitor’s relationship to a place may pass back and forth between “having” and “being,” even when the former is ultimately more determinative.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> Uptin Saiidi, “Millennials Are Prioritizing ‘Experiences’ Over Stuff,” *CNBC*, May 5, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/05/millennials-are-prioritizing-experiences-over-stuff.html>

<sup>31</sup> See James Hamblin, “Buy Experiences, Not Things,” *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/10/buy-experiences/381132/>

<sup>32</sup> Likewise, I would not want to discount the way in which the manifestation of the Grand Canyon might exceed or break through the prepackaged expectations. It is important to remember that we are “struck” by wonder. We can foster openness to it, but we cannot simply produce it. It involves an emphatic encounter with otherness. Percy claims that “the wonder and delight of [Cárdenas] arose from his penetration of the thing itself, from a progressive discovery of depths, patterns, colors, shadows, etc.,” p. 47. But surely the Canyon “strikes” him more than he penetrates it.

Marcel frequently writes of an ontological need or exigence, a deep hunger to transcend self-enclosure and to experience being its fullness. The widespread hunger to “reconnect with nature” (and here we might consider the rapid growth of ecotourism) may be one manifestation of such a need, even if it is often intertwined with desires to consume experiences or to be seen experiencing. Bugbee makes this connection in his essay on Marcel’s “*L’Exigence Ontologique*.” He writes of how the ontological exigence can give rise to a “spirit of consecration”: “Surely the beings we come to care for deeply, the place of our dwelling, and the things of the place—indeed all that occupies our attention in eliciting, sustaining, and deepening our concern—would be salient for us in considering how a spirit of consecration may come to be nurtured in us.”<sup>33</sup> Bugbee begins with how our home place may call for consecration, but he then opens out to “all that occupies our attention.”<sup>34</sup> We might need to further qualify Percy’s analysis in light of this. If someone’s trip to the Grand Canyon is animated by ontological need, he or she will be less likely to approach it as an experience to consume.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the trip may even nurture a spirit of consecration. It would become something closer to a pilgrimage than a vacation.<sup>36</sup>

The point, though, is not simply that a relationship of “being” would be more fulfilling than a relationship of “having.” On its own, this would simply reinscribe an instrumentalist calculus at another level. For Marcel, a relationship of “being” transcends the self. We leave behind the world of subject and object and enter the world of the “we,” the intersubjective. Such relationships are rich with ethical import, with the possibility of attentiveness and care. The language of consecration testifies to how these relationships can be imbued with the sacred. Marcel usually focuses on such relationships between humans, but the passage in “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy” suggests that such relationships are possible with places too. Marcel makes this point explicitly in the passage from “Life and the Sacred” mentioned by Thomas Busch in his interview. There Marcel points to “all kinds of experiences” of the sacred “where living nature becomes an object of contemplation.”<sup>37</sup> Many ecological thinkers have called for such relationships. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, for instance, David Abram writes:

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<sup>33</sup> Henry Bugbee, “*L’Exigence Ontologique*” in P.A. Schilpp and L.E. Hahn (eds), *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (La Salle: Open Court, 1984), p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> In “The Wilderness of Henry Bugbee,” Conway claims that “Bugbee was able to partake of wilderness almost everywhere he traveled. He equally appreciated the macroscopic wonders revered by environmental hyperopes and the microscopic miracles treasured by environmental myopes. He found wilderness while rowing, while standing watch in the South Pacific, while angling for trout, while stranded in a snowstorm, and while saving a drowning stranger” (p. 261). In his response to Bugbee’s essay in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Marcel notes that in French “the verb *consacrer* in the reflexive form...merely means that one gives oneself without reservation to a certain undertaking.” See “Reply to Henry G. Bugbee,” p. 94. At times Marcel’s own uses of “consecration” seem to be in line with this, rather than the meaning of sacralization intended by Bugbee. Still, Marcel does not seem to dismiss Bugbee’s rendering as illegitimate, and this sense does seem to be in the spirit of the essays noted by Busch in his interview.

<sup>35</sup> We could further qualify Percy’s critique of photography. He undoubtedly identifies a real phenomenon. The camera can become an obscuring mediation or a means of consumption, especially the smartphone that allows one to immediately begin manipulating or sharing the photo and thus to stop attending to what was photographed. It can pull us away from our surroundings. But for the photographer—and perhaps especially the nature photographer—the camera can also become a means of attunement, a means of opening oneself to a place. It can encourage one to look with mindful care.

<sup>36</sup> In recent years there has actually been a marked increase in pilgrimages by young people, even as traditional religious affiliation decreases throughout Western Europe and North America. See, for instance, Lluís Oviedo, Scarlett de Courcier, and Miguel Farias, “Rise of Pilgrims on the *Camino* to Santiago: Sign of Change or Religious Revival?” *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2014): 433-442.

<sup>37</sup> Marcel, *TWB*, p. 110.

It may be that the new “environmental ethic” toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire—an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature—will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.<sup>38</sup>

Marcel would have likely resonated with Abram’s call for “renewed attentiveness.” He would also have likely agreed that such an approach is more promising than an abstract philosophical ethic.

In the passage from “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy,” Marcel claims that someone who calls a place home will be more likely to have such a relationship with it. Still, it seems likely that Marcel, as an avid traveler himself and a philosopher of “*homo viator*,” would want the “wayfarer” to move beyond the stance of “having.”<sup>39</sup> In “The Loss of the Creature,” Percy suggests a few possible ways this might happen in his Grand Canyon scenario. All of them avoid “the approved confrontation of the tour and the Park Service.”<sup>40</sup> One might, for instance, try to get off the beaten track or to ironize the tourist experience. The main emphasis, though, is on trying to reopen oneself, to unclog one’s powers of perception. Percy emphasizes that what needs to be shaken off is the prepackaging of the Canyon.

But there are other pervasive ways in which our perception may become clogged, distorted, or dulled. Marcel claims that “experience reveals that those pure parts of oneself which alone can make contact with being are concealed from the outset by a mass of accretions and encrustations.”<sup>41</sup> Our daily cares and worries, for instance, can make us less attentive and keep us in a stance of “having.” Marcel notes how our ego and desire for autonomy often cut us off from the experience of being in its depth.<sup>42</sup> How to open ourselves back up?<sup>43</sup> The philosopher William Desmond, who cites Marcel throughout his body of work, claims that we need to

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<sup>38</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> It also seems that Marcel himself had such meaningful experiences visiting the mountains in his childhood. He writes in his autobiography: “I loved nature; I was a tireless walker. During the school year, I lived for the upcoming vacation that we would spend every year in a different place, and always in the mountains.” See *Awakenings*, translated by Peter S. Rogers (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 2002), pp. 54-55.

<sup>40</sup> Percy, “The Loss of the Creature,” p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Marcel, “The Ego and its Relation to Others” in *Homo Viator*, pp. 13-28. The emphasis in this essay is on relations with human others, but there are analogies to be drawn with our relation to place. Consider this passage: “I must puncture the illusion, infinitely persistent it is true, that I am possessed of unquestionable privileges which make me the centre of my universe, while other people are either mere obstructions to be removed or circumvented, or else those echoing amplifiers, whose purpose is to foster my self-complacency” (p. 19).

<sup>43</sup> This is arguably the guiding question of Bugbee’s *The Inward Morning*. Here we are dealing specifically with philosophy as a way of life, to use Pierre Hadot’s phrase, philosophy as practice. For practices of reopening or re-attunement to nonhuman nature, we could turn to any number of figures. Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” and Thoreau’s deliberate living come to mind, as do Rachel Carson along the Maine coast and Annie Dillard at Tinker Creek. We could also turn to Erazim Kohák’s *The Embers and the Stars* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987). Kohák is interesting vis-à-vis Marcel in that he brings together phenomenology and personalism.



recover the patience of being that precedes our striving to be. We need to draw closer to our constitutive receptivity.<sup>44</sup> In doing so we become more mindful of being in its otherness. Desmond describes a non-grasping openness that he calls “agapeic mind.”<sup>45</sup> This involves a “state of high alert that paradoxically has nothing insistent about it. It demands a strange mix of active mind and patient readiness, energy of being and of being nothing.”<sup>46</sup> It is a “noninstrumental vigilance.”<sup>47</sup> Desmond describes his own practice of agapeic mind on a beach near Clonakilty in Ireland. At first what come to him are the observations that anyone could pause and take in: “I look out to at the sea and watch. The waves come in, retreat, come in, retreat; there is the background murmur of a low whoosh. On the other side of the bay, the hill is a motley of greens; there is fog on the horizon.”<sup>48</sup> This is not agapeic mind, but it can be the first step toward it. Such mindfulness requires greater patience. Eventually “the self comes to sink into a place with time; the place tends to pass over into the mind. The mind is in the place; the place is in mind. This is a deeper mediation of the self and world than the minimally implicated observation of one who passes through the middle.”<sup>49</sup> For Desmond such mindfulness is agapeic because it moves beyond instrumentalism, which presupposes a sharp contrast between self and world. It involves an implicit affirmation of the place for its own sake, an affirmation of our intimacy and relatedness to the world. It is thus rich with ethical promise. Agapeic mind can give rise to care.

There are similarities between such mindfulness and Marcel’s *disponibilité*. Note that Desmond is not describing a state that is simply passive. It is a “state of high alert,” “a strange mix of active mind and patient readiness.” Marcel’s *disponibilité* is similarly a state of responsive, attentive readiness, one particularly ready to serve and to care.<sup>50</sup> Desmond, like Bugbee before him, helps us see what a Marcelian *disponibilité* toward place would look like.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in his most recent writings, Desmond has more explicitly suggested such an interpretation of Marcel. In Desmond’s philosophy, he frequently speaks of the ethos of “serviceable disposability,” where the value of being is reduced to its use value.<sup>52</sup> He has recently contrasted this serviceable disposability with Marcel’s “disposability”/*disponibilité*. Desmond plays off the similar language while pointing out the divergent approaches to the

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<sup>44</sup> Desmond references Marcel throughout his books and essays. He writes about Marcel at length in “Philosophies of Religion: Marcel, Jaspers, Levinas” in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 131-174.

<sup>45</sup> William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 122. For an insightful essay on how Desmond’s philosophy can inform environmental ethics, see Alexandra Romanynshyn, “Metaxology and Environmental Ethics: On the Ethical Response to the Aesthetics of Nature as Other in the Between” in Dennis Vanden Auwelle (ed.), *William Desmond’s Philosophy between Metaphysics, Religion, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 303-315.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> On *disponibilité*, see Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, pp. 38-57.

<sup>51</sup> In “*L’Exigence Ontologique*,” Bugbee states, “Being is utterly unintelligible apart from a participation in being with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, and with all one’s mind. Yet that seems to require of one no more than oneself, willingly disposed” (p. 91).

<sup>52</sup> Marcel expresses similar concerns throughout his writings. In “The Limitations of Industrial Civilization,” for instance, he is concerned about the “danger of the technical environment becoming for us the pattern of the universe,” since this would ultimately “reconstitute the world, moulding it to its own image.” See *The Decline of Wisdom*, translated by Manya Harari (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 13.

world. Desmond claims that the latter is marked by “compassion for transient beauty” and can help us see that the “world is still full of its given glory.”<sup>53</sup>

Marcel would undoubtedly stress that living in a place hardly guarantees a healthy relationship with it, just as being married to someone does not guarantee a healthy relationship. Humans can betray or corrupt the promise of a place.<sup>54</sup> As noted above, though, Marcel suggests in “An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy” that those who call a place home are more likely to have a relationship of “being” with it, to appreciate its inexhaustibility, and perhaps in turn to respect and care for it. Given Marcel’s broader concerns, he would likely wish to include within such a relationship the relationships with other humans that call this place home.<sup>55</sup> Still, he says nothing here to suggest that the relationship of “being” with the place should be reduced to these human relationships. His mention of “creative interchange” calls to mind another of Marcel’s key ideas—creative fidelity, a reciprocal relationship of ongoing attunement, responsiveness, and exchange. This section will briefly explore the possibility of a “creative fidelity” to place.

Returning to “The Loss of the Creature,” Percy suggests that even the park rangers will be dulled to the Grand Canyon. They will see it in light of their tourism responsibilities. For the ranger, he claims, “it is a tissue of everyday signs relevant to his own prospects—the blue haze down there means that he will probably get rained on during the donkey ride.”<sup>56</sup> It is not hard to imagine such a ranger, but it is equally easy to imagine a ranger where the relationship with the canyon is marked by Marcelian creative fidelity. The ranger’s wonder at the Grand Canyon could deepen as the ranger explores it and views it from different vantage points. The ranger could be continually struck by how it changes throughout the seasons of the year and indeed throughout the day, with the changing weather and with the changing play of light. Wonder could deepen at the animals and plants of the park, the complex web of relationships that bind them together and bind them to the place—a web which includes the ranger. This deepening wonder could give rise to a strong desire to preserve and care for this place and the creatures that inhabit it. Again, though, there are many possibilities between these two extremes. Undoubtedly for many rangers there would be a mix of routine—even drudgery—with renewed wonder and mindful care.

Some degree of creative fidelity will mark a healthy local culture. (There are again no guarantees, of course. A mindful wayfarer may at times appreciate and value what locals take for granted, neglect, or exploit.) This could be evident in its farming practices, industries, infrastructure, architecture, folkways, stories, art, and religious practice.<sup>57</sup> It could also be seen in its place names and local language.<sup>58</sup> John O’Donohue, for instance, recounts how a farmer from the shores of Loch Corrib in Ireland visited a friend’s art gallery once a year. During one visit,

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<sup>53</sup> William Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), p. 58.

<sup>54</sup> Consider Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004), where Sethe recalls the natural beauty of the Kentucky plantation from which she escaped—ironically named “Sweet Home”—and how the exploitation and violence perpetrated there render that beauty treacherous.

<sup>55</sup> It is also important to note that Marcel’s hypothetical place seems to be a town or city. While much of this essay takes its examples from rural or wild places, this is a salutary reminder that humans and their cities are a part of nature too.

<sup>56</sup> Percy, “The Loss of the Creature,” p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> For a classic examination of such creative interchange in agricultural practices, see F.H. King, *Farmers of Forty Centuries: Organic Farming in China, Korea, and Japan* (New York: Dover, 2004). For a more recent examination, see James Rebanks’ account of traditional shepherding practices in the Lake District in *The Shepherd’s Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> On language and landscape, see Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

the gallery owner introduced the farmer to a poet and the poet proceeded to point out “all the intricacies and hidden symbolism of the exhibition.”<sup>59</sup> The farmer was grateful and in turn told the poet about what he called the “Teannalach” of Loch Corrib: how on “summer days when the lake is absolutely still and everything is silent, [he could] hear how the elements and the surface of the lake make a magic music together.”<sup>60</sup> The gallery owner later asked one of the farmer’s neighbors about Teannalach, and the neighbor concurred that “they have that word all right up there where he lives. I have never seen the word written down. And it is hard to say what it means. I suppose it means awareness, but in truth it is about seven layers deeper than awareness.”<sup>61</sup> One of the implications of this anecdote is that the poet, for all his aesthetic insight, had something to learn from the profound (and profoundly) local knowledge of the farmer. The story attests to the deep attunement possible between people and the particularities of their place.

Few contemporary writers have given more thought to the “creative fidelity” that can exist between people and places than Wendell Berry, the farmer-poet-essayist from Kentucky.<sup>62</sup> While Marcel is more a writer of the city and Berry of the countryside, there are fruitful comparisons to draw between them.<sup>63</sup> Fidelity is a key word for both Marcel and Berry. Both of them use it to describe a relationship marked by ongoing re-attunement, exchange, and care. Like Marcel, Berry frequently talks about such fidelity in human relationships, including within marriages and families, but he also frequently talks about such fidelity in regards to place.<sup>64</sup> “The standards of our behavior,” he writes, “must be derived, not from the capability of technology, but from the nature of places and communities.”<sup>65</sup> For Berry, fidelity should teach us how to care for a place.

For both Marcel and Berry, true fidelity recognizes the other’s inexhaustibility. Berry left the literary world of New York City to return to a small farm in the Kentucky county where his family has lived for generations. His poem “The Wild Geese” uses a persimmon seed to suggest the hidden richness of this place: “We open / a persimmon seed to find the tree / that stands in promise, / pale, in the seed’s marrow.”<sup>66</sup> One of the recurring themes of Berry’s work is that there is always more to a place than we can grasp. For Berry, restless boredom is our failing. This is where “Wild Geese” ends: “And we pray, not / for new earth or heaven, but to be / quiet

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<sup>59</sup> John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2004), p. 130.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> On Berry as a writer of place, see Fritz Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2011) and Jeffrey Bilbro, *Virtues of Renewal: Wendell Berry’s Sustainable Forms* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2018).

<sup>63</sup> The possible comparisons go beyond those noted in this essay. In *Life is a Miracle* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), for instance, Berry worries about how even some people who genuinely want to “save” the natural world still reduce it to an “assemblage of perfectly featureless and dispirited ‘ecosystems,’ ‘organisms,’ ‘environments,’ ‘mechanisms,’ and the like. It is impossible to prefigure the salvation of the world in the same language by which the world has been dismembered and defaced” (p. 8). This calls to mind Marcel’s analogous concern about the “functionalization” of human life and the resultant undermining of coherence and dignity. In the same volume, Berry also distinguishes between problems and mysteries: “As soon as a mystery is scheduled for solution, it is no longer a mystery; it is a problem” (p. 36).

<sup>64</sup> Berry would not want us to set up an opposition here, though. In a healthy community fidelity to people, landscape, flora, and fauna are intertwined and inextricably bound together.

<sup>65</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Berry, “The Wild Geese” in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1998), p. 90.

in heart, and in eye / clear. What we need is here.”<sup>67</sup> In his book *Life is a Miracle*, Berry writes, “My own experience has shown me that it is possible to live in and attentively study the same small place decade after decade, and find that it ceaselessly evades and exceeds comprehension.”<sup>68</sup> Berry notes how the work of certain artists and scientists testifies to this. He points to Paul Cézanne’s continual returns to Mont Sainte-Victoire and to how “William Carlos Williams spent a long life writing about Rutherford, New Jersey.”<sup>69</sup> He also points to the entomologist Jean Henri Fabre who “spent the last thirty-odd years of his life studying the insects and other creatures of his small *harmas* near Sérignan.”<sup>70</sup> For both Marcel and Berry, fidelity entails caring love. “We know enough of our own history by now,” Berry claims, “to be aware that people *exploit* what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they *defend* what they love. To defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know.”<sup>71</sup> Berry claims, and Marcel would agree, that “affection requires us to break out of the abstractions.”<sup>72</sup> Faithful, caring love is always directed to the particular, the concrete.

To conclude, the purpose of this short essay is not to show that Marcel offers a fully formed account of nonhuman nature or a developed environmental ethic. It is more to echo Thomas Busch’s claim that there are affordances in Marcel’s work for such an account and ethic and in particular for a caring, attentive relationship to place. Indeed, some of Marcel’s central concepts—the distinction between being and having, *disponibilité*, creative fidelity—invite extension in this regard. Furthermore, Marcel can be brought into productive conversation with writers and thinkers who do offer such an ethic. This essay has hopefully suggested some of the ways this conversation could develop.

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 139.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. In these examples wonder does not strike suddenly so much as unfold and deepen over time.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* There are dangers that attend the language of fidelity and affection, especially if they are used in a flatter sense than they are deployed by Marcel and Berry. They risk domesticating or romanticizing the natural world. In ecological writing of recent decades much attention has been given to the radical otherness of nonhuman nature. Bugbee’s broad concept of “wilderness” is salutary in this regard, and in a related way Marcel’s and Berry’s attention to the inexhaustibility of a place recognizes that it can never be fully grasped, that it will always remain mysterious. I suspect Bugbee, Marcel, and Berry would warn against the most extreme formulations of uncanny nature, though, since they may seem to foreclose an intimate interchange that still respects otherness. These formulations may even inadvertently encourage a sense that an alien and potentially hostile nature needs to be mastered.