

EXPERIENCING MCSHANE'S HAUNTING QUESTIONS

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Philip McShane's writings are full of allusions. Many of his book titles allude to the books of prominent people in their field: Adam Smith (*Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations*), Karl Marx (*Economics for Everyone: Das Jus Kapital*), Paul Tillich (*The Shaping of the Foundations: Being at Home in the Transcendental Method*), St. John of the Cross (*Music That is Soundless*), Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Tongue: From Big Bang to Coloured Wholes*), Seamus Heaney (*Redress of Poise: The End of Lonergan's Work*), Roger Penrose (*The Road to Religious Reality: Method in Theology 101 AD 9011*), Steed, Turner and Wallace (*The Future: Core Precepts in Supramolecular Method and Nanochemistry*), Ezra Pound (the *Cantower* website series), Frederic Chopin and John Field (the *Field Nocturnes* website series)—to name a few. Then there are the continual allusions to James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, and Tchaikovsky, among others.

One of those allusions is to Jacques Derrida's hauntology. In his book *Spectres of Marx*, in which he coined the term *hauntology*, Jacques Derrida refers to Marx's tendency to "haunt Western society from beyond the grave." In *Pastkeynes and Pastmodern Economics: A Fresh Pragmatism*, Phil refers to the opening paragraph of *The Communist Manifesto*, substituting 'Economics' for 'Europe' and 'complaint' for 'communism.' "A spectre is haunting Economics—the spectre of complaint. All the powers of old Economics have entered into a holy alliance to exercise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Meternichand Guizot, French Radicals and German policemen."¹

And later in the *Cantower X*, he speaks of 'a deep haunting question':

You may move past this question [What is it to interpret?] easily at this stage, but it can be a deep haunting question. In my first years of struggling with Lonergan's suggestion of a "division of labour" in the late sixties and early seventies I paused in many strange places, in fields, on university

¹ *Pastkeynes and Pastmodern Economics: A Fresh Pragmatism* (Nova Scotia: Axial Press, 2000) 113.

campus grounds, on beaches, puzzling about how to interpret our human way from past to future.²

I first encountered Lonergan's *Insight* and *Method in Theology* in the 1970s, as part of a theology degree. After that my concerns and focus shifted to housing policy, advocacy, and management: I worked as a housing manager living on a high-rise public housing estate, founded a housing co-operative, analyzed and critiqued government housing policies, and advocated for better housing policies.

In 2002, I went from doing housing policy, research, and advocacy in a non-government housing organisation to researching in a position at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, which was one of the premier housing research centres in Australia.

I soon found myself confronted by different types of housing research and many debates among researchers who were doing different things and often at cross-purposes. As I reflected on them, I recalled my previous work on functional specialization. This set me on the path of further exploration. I became more and more dissatisfied with the way in which housing research was conducted and its lack of traction within government decisions. I began to raise fundamental questions about the entrenched commonsense culture of housing research. It needed radical transformation if it were to provide practical and innovative advice to decision-makers.

As I began more intensive work on functional specialization, Lonergan pointed me to something beyond my current understanding of science. He proffered an invitation. My beginning was simply a matter of belief: that concerted work on Lonergan's writings would take me into a new world, opening up new vistas and new horizons.

As I read the writings of various Lonergan scholars, I was perturbed by the way in which many of them mindlessly 'regurgitated' Lonergan's writings. It was at this point that I came across Phil McShane. He was one of the few Lonergan scholars who wrote on Lonergan's functional specialties and his economics.

I met Phil on four occasions only. In 2007, he made the long trip to Australia twice: the first to St. Ignatius College, Riverview and the Australian Lonergan Workshop; the second for the Australian Conference celebrating the Fifty Years of *Insight*. I met him a third time in 2009 when

² Cantower X, "Foundations: A Place in the Sun," 1, n. 1, available at <http://www.philipmeshane.org/cantowers>.

I attended the Conference on *A New Paradigm of Economics: Perspectives from Bernard Lonergan* at Seton Hall and the Halifax Lonergan Conference on Global Functional Collaboration. Our last meeting was in 2014 in Vancouver when I attended the 6th International Lonergan Conference, *Functional Collaboration in the Academy: Advancing Bernard Lonergan's Central Achievement*. Notwithstanding these few meetings, through his writings he was a significant figure in transforming my way of understanding and doing science.

I began with his writings on Lonergan's economics—*Economics for Everyone: Das Jus Kapital; Pastkeynes and Pastmodern Economics: A Fresh Pragmatism; Beyond Establishment Economics: No Thank You, Mankiw; and Lonergan's Challenge to the University and the Economy*. I was already sceptical about the current state of economics, but the shift in perspective required to understand an economy proved quite a challenge. Indeed, it seemed to me that it was a template, an example, of how we need to shift from a commonsense understanding of our society to a theoretical understanding. By clearly distinguishing economics from psychology and behaviour (and from technology, politics, cultural studies, and theology), it threw up a challenge for current social and economic research. I began to distinguish the difference between description as something in relation to us and explanation as a relation between things. I began to understand how most social and economic research was entrenched in sophisticated descriptions of events and pointed to the motivations and interests of social agents, groups, or classes as explanations of these events. In stark contrast, Lonergan's economics seeks to understand the processes or functions that constitute an economy. It takes as its starting point the production process and distinguishes and relates two modes of production: a basic mode that produces goods and services that enter the standard of living within a society; and a surplus mode that produces and maintains equipment for the basic mode.³

My second foray into Phil's writings was around functional specialisation, what Phil variously termed 'hodic method,' 'cyclic functional collaboration,' 'global functional collaboration,' 'functional collaboration,' and 'futurology.' As I noted above, I had remembered

³ My various writings on economics, inspired by Phil, are available at: <http://artfulhousing.com.au/economics> (accessed January 31, 2022). Some, such as *Housing in a Sane Global Economy – Starting Economics: Again!* and *Evidence-based Policy and Piketty's Plight*, echo his provocative comments.

functional specialisation when I encountered cross-purpose debates among housing researchers. I turned to Phil's writings because he was one of the few Lonergan scholars who had taken the eight functional specialties beyond theology and who had taken seriously Lonergan's discovery as of fundamental significance for the future of humankind. As I moved into Phil's writings on functional collaboration, I gradually began to glimpse the challenge.

My fundamental issue was not just distinguishing and identifying what I am doing when I am doing housing research (including critiquing research and policy and, proposing housing policies) but also relating these different activities to each other. I was embedded within a housing research and policy culture that focused on events out there and was hostile to self-reflection and self-appropriation. Housing researchers are largely cemented to the solidity of a kind of empirical research that neglects to identify, distinguish, and relate different activities. Yet, some were promoting other approaches and methods. So, in seeking to make sense of functional collaboration in the context of housing research, I spent my time shifting between two sets of texts—those focusing on functional collaboration and those focusing on housing research and policy—seeking clues as to what functional collaboration might mean beyond a simple, mindless regurgitation of *Method*.

I was struck by the following remark in Lonergan's introduction to *Method*:

In general, what we shall have to say, is to be taken as a model. By a model is not meant something to be copied or imitated. By a model is not meant a description of reality or a hypothesis about reality. It is simply an intelligible, interlocking set of terms and relations that it may be well to have about when it comes to describing reality or to forming hypotheses. As the proverb, so the model is something worth keeping in mind when one confronts a situation or tackles a job.

However, I do not think I am offering merely models. On the contrary, I hope readers will find more than mere models in what I shall say. But it is up to them to find it.⁴

My challenge was to shift from an understanding of the functional specialties as a way of distinguishing different types of research (as a 'filing system') to understanding them as a unity-identity-whole, as "an intelligible,

⁴ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 4.

interlocking set of terms and relations” that constitute what was then an unknown x . What was functional collaboration about? My challenge was not only to understand each functional specialty (and that was by no means clear) but also to understand them as a whole. I very slowly came to see that functional collaboration was the implicit but muddled way in which humankind progresses. By making it explicit, Lonergan had found the key to making progress in any area of human endeavour. Progress would no longer be defined in terms of the products of human invention but rather in terms of the processes whereby it was brought about. Progress is about going from where we are now to implementing some new development. To bring it about we have to traverse and find new answers to eight different types of questions—an empirical question, a definitional question, an historical question, a critical/evaluative question, a transformative/visionary question, a policy question, a strategic question, and a practical question. But how do we answer these questions? Each question requires its own method, methods develop, and some methods are more adequate than others. Functional collaboration is a new way of understanding and doing science, one that aligns science with making progress.⁵ All through this personal transformation, Phil's writings were there, inviting me to something more, prodding me on and giving me glimpses of something larger through a glass darkly.

After forty years in housing management, research, policy and advocacy, I still hope for and dream of a better housing future. At the beginning of *The Shaping of Foundations*, Phil has a quote from Gaston Bachelard that I have made my own:

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home. Late in life, with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house.⁶

Just as building a home requires collaboration between many different people, housing research requires a global ‘framework for collaborative creativity’ that will continually offset partisan interests, provide practical

⁵ For my take on functional collaboration with housing as a case study, see *Making Progress in Housing: A Framework for Collaborative Research* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

⁶ *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, Boston 1969) 61.

and innovative advice to decision-makers, and bear fruit in a better housing system. My hope is that housing researchers will have the courage to leave the ‘childhood home’ of common sense and build the dream home of the future—better built, lighter, and larger.

My initial experience of reading Phil’s many books, articles, and series was one of bewilderment—for the most part, I had little idea what he was on about. That experience continues. But along with the experience of bewilderment is the experience of being stretched, of gradually getting glimpses of new meanings. This is what makes it worthwhile.

For me, Phil is the pre-eminent interpreter and teacher of Lonergan’s writings. He is the ‘Paul’ for Lonergan, pushing his writings beyond their original context. No longer is functional specialisation the sole preserve of theology; Phil has showed its broader relevance as a key dynamic within local and global history.

Now, his questions still haunt me. Questions such as the following:

- Amendment A – “Do you view humanity as possibly maturing—in some serious way—or just messing along between good and evil, whatever you think they are?”
- Dialectic – What do each of the terms (*Assembly, Completion, Comparison, Reduction, Classification, and Selection*) on page 250 of *Method* mean?
- Lonergan’s 1833 Overture – How do we face the challenge of the 16 lines of page 250 of *Method* (beginning at line 18)?
- 60910 – What is it to interpret? What is *Insight* Chapter 17.3 about, particularly the paragraph running from page 609 to 610?
- Aggreformism – What does that paragraph on page 489 of *Insight* (Chapter 15.7.2) beginning “Study of an organism begins ...” mean?
- Diagrams – What do his eight plus metagrams (W1 through W0) point to, for example, his first, HS f(p ; c ; b ; z ; u ; r), and his last, $\{M(W_3)^{0\Phi T}\}^4$?

I am making slow progress in understanding these questions and their relevance for progress in housing. I am making some slow progress in finding answers—walking slowly. Yet, these questions continue to haunt me as I push towards a deeper understanding of the challenges of functional collaboration and the new economics. To some extent these haunting questions have also become mine. In his haunting questions, Phil lives on.

