

Field Nocturnes 6

A First Reading of *Insight* 464[489]

We should have the text before us, and experience that reading: for me, fifty years after my first astonished reading. I remain astonished. For you, most likely not a first reading, but let us hope that it is the beginning of a refreshing and astonishing series of pragmatic readings.

“Study of the organism begins from the thing-for-us, from the organism as exhibited to our senses. A first step is a descriptive differentiation of different parts, and since most of the parts are inside, this descriptive preliminary necessitates dissection or anatomy. A second step consists in the accumulations of insights that relate described parts to organic events, occurrences, operations. By these insights, the parts become known as organs, and the further knowledge constituted by the insights is a grasp of intelligibilities that

(1) are immanent in the several parts,

(2) refer each part to what it can do and, under determinable conditions, will do,
and

(3) relate the capacity-for-performance of each part to the capacities-for-performance of the other parts.

So physiology follows anatomy. A third step is to effect the transition from the thing-for-us to the thing-itself, from insights that grasp described parts as organs to insights that grasp conjugate forms systematizing otherwise coincidental manifolds of chemical and physical processes. By this transition, one links physiology with biochemistry and biophysics. To this end, there have to be invented appropriate symbolic images of the relevant chemical and physical processes; in these images there have to be grasped by insight the laws of the higher system that account for regularities beyond the range of physical and chemical explanation; from these laws, there has to be constructed the flexible circle of schemes of recurrence in which the organism functions; finally this

flexible circle of schemes must be coincident with the related set of capacities-for-performance that previously was grasped in sensibly presented organs.”¹

If you are a beginner, especially as, say, a non-scientist, then you may find this paragraph massively opaque, even if fascinating or attractive. I came at it originally in 1958 as a scientist, though then in my second year of philosophy. But my science was mathematical physics: I had not even had the benefit of school botany. So, in that, you may be ahead of me: as we shall see, that depends on how you were taught school botany or perhaps human zoology.

I use the phrase “as we shall see” here and I like to think that I am not in the frame of mind of the isolated Lonergan when he ventured forward on this lonely task, which for us is a common task. What is our task? It is “to prepare our statement of the integral heuristic structure we have named metaphysics”: that is the way Lonergan identified the task a few pages earlier.² But it gives a useful view of his climb to go back to the paragraph from which that last quotation comes. It begins “In our study....” He does not mean “our” in the way I am trying to use it. It is the conventional royal plural that was standard in those days. It is the “our” in the quotation. It is the “our” that follows in that paragraph: “We shall offer our own account of the matter”.

Now I am not blaming Lonergan here. What else could he do? He had generating in himself, over more than a quarter of a century, a perspective on a massive and total cultural change.³ Total? The key ingredient was still missing: the notion of a collaborative cyclic dynamic that would offer a pragmatic way of turning his “our” into

¹*Insight*, 464[489]. I note that I am quoting from the first edition; the later edition, unfortunately, compacts Lonergan’s useful spread of the three characteristics of the insights of physiology.

²*Insight*, 458[464].

³It is altogether worthwhile to read his letter to his superior in 1935, available in Part 2 of Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*: it is listed there as Image number 22. Here we have him flying forward - and he is not at all standing still as he types on his little machine - eighteen years later.

our “our”. What will “prepare our statement of the integral heuristic structure” of global reaching is that turning, that cycling and recycling, and “our” is to be the community of the Tower of Able. But that community is perhaps, alas, a century away: that depends on you. In this century, we need some few who are willing, able, and lucky enough to be able to make their own luck, to rise to each preparing their own statement of an adequate heuristics.

To do that we need to help one another along, so that we leave Lonergan’s “our” behind: we leave the illusions related to doctrinal reading behind and try the step-by-step climb that is a genuine following of Lonergan. Reading *Insight* doctrinally is like reading a text on cello-playing, and if it not done luminously, then it leads easily to *haute vulgarization*. I have been saying such things for decades, of course, just as I have been talking for years about this page in *Insight*. But now I wish to have a shot, in my 77th year, at generating a community that can each actually make a luminous significant statements of account. The self-luminous statement, technically, bubbles into the cycle 2/3 rds way down page 250 of *Method in Theology*. You see how the “two-page” project fits together as a dynamic towards a transformed future? Well, probably not, or at least not with sufficiently effectively clarity. I claim this because the last couple of generations of Lonergan students have not put it together. Yet is it not simple, like the story of Columbus and the problem of standing an egg on its end as told by Lonergan, “its knowing where to tap”?

Well, let us put it simply: “our account” in *Insight* was - and still is - just too “far out”. What is going to get it into the global mainstream is the strategy of re-cycling that is Lonergan’s discovery of global thinking’s needs. But that is **my** very compact account: a doctrine about doctrines. It was spelled out in *Method in Theology: Revisions and Implementations*. We are not going there in this adventure. What we - the unroyal plural - are aiming at here is **you** arriving at your own account of that single paragraph on “the study of the organism”. But to have that account as a personal possession requires repeating in your own way the climb that led Lonergan to his compact account.

Obviously, if it is our climb together it is easier: might you find local or e-mail community in that effort? Have you the time and energy?

My decision to produce a 300-page introduction to this paragraph of *Insight* has been replaced by the strategy of offering small steps, not logical steps but pedagogical, anecdotal, persuasive. In the long run the climb involves, as I mentioned already, venturing into the standard literature related, at different levels, to our topic. But for a start, it is a matter of moving gently along with me, contemplatively: in the style that Lonergan invites us to in the first paragraph of *Insight*: humbly puttering through little problems. The mood of the puttering is all-important. Let us assume the worst here; that your re-reading of the paragraph just now, and these few comments of mine, do not freshen your view. We have, then, failed together. In the next *Field Nocturne* I will try again, not to begin, but to lighten, enlighten, the mood, to pull in perspectives some of which we hopefully share. It is a matter of motivation, something parallel to what I would do in a beginning class in physics or in piano; inspiring by looking towards achievements. But you may already be inspired: then *Field Nocturnes 8* awaits you. Still, the next, seventh, essay helps us to see the beauty of the edge that finite minding fails to see.

We are on the edge of the field, or the lake, or eternity.

*"I want to know if you can live with failure,
yours and mine,
and still stand on the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
Yes!"*⁴

I have quoted the Dreamer woman before,⁵ and this may puzzle you. The longer cycle of decline will turn towards home when science becomes a shouting with the

⁴Oriah Mountain Dreamer, *The Invitation*, Harper San Francisco, 1999, 80.

⁵See *Field Nocturnes 5*, at note 9.

sunflower at the moon. "Sunflowers Speak to Us of Growing".⁶

" 'Oh! how beautiful you are!'

'Am I not?' the flower responded, sweetly. 'And I was born at the same moment as the sun...' "⁷

So, the study of the organism might begin, on one's knees in the garden.

⁶The title of *Cantower 2*.

⁷Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince*, Harbrace Paperback, 1973, 32-3.