

Field Nocturnes 9

The Hearing Organism

For the convenience of your easy identification of your immediate interest, I divide this essay into two sections. Section one carries forward our focus on the question, “what is hearing?”. There we shall move forward as slowly and gently as possible. But our quiet struggle may raise questions for some, and at all events there are the larger contexts of effectiveness and of collaboration. These I deal with, from my point of view, in the following section, which deals with types of audience. What of questions you raise, or that bubble up in you? These we may be able to deal with either by correspondence or by inclusion in later Nocturnes. Our efforts are open; our collaborations are open-ended in a struggle for fresh emergent creativity, for the beauty of a unified global lift of inquiry and culture.

1. Taking in Sound

We continue here musing over the ear, starting on the outside and availing of diagrams to move physically within. We are still going to move naively, not even stopping to say just what I mean by that until later Nocturnes. But the approach is odd and novel even if thus kept simple. The “taking in” of the title is ambiguous. We are going to try to take in ourselves taking in sound. We might even start with an elementary illustration of that by an exercise of **noticing**. We are each self-appropriating our two ears in their tunneling towards thought. Have you noticed seriously before that when you feel your ears, you make noises that you hear? And you can vary the noises magnificently by poking fingers inside - not too vigorously please! This just adds to your questions - that is the function of noticing and, further, of any ordering of the noticing and noticed that you might do. That adding, a cyclic adding as we shall see, is something we must come back to in the second section. But here, merely enjoy the noticing, and perhaps the curiosity that bubbles up about where the noise is of the

finger in your ear. That question, quest, is to carry us forward, slowly, through a long series of Nocturnes.

You surely agree that this pace and mood are not a standard text-book attitude, and indeed you may even be somewhat annoyed at it. Whatever: we, each of us, need to be honest in our self-discovery, a self-discovery which is meshed into a broad cultural orientation with which we may have to do battle. Or at least, acknowledge as a state of our living or partly living. Our venture here is, if you like, an unrealistic time-out from the usual approach, of ourselves even, but certainly of classes in, say, in grade twelve or in pre-med.

We did not get very far in the previous essay: we found diagrams, perhaps, on the internet, got a sense of that first step of dissection or anatomy. Whatever text or diagrams you are using, they throw a bundle of unfamiliar names at you. How are you to manage this challenge, this nuisance? The need to pass exams gives you one lead, one that is regularly necessary. But might you get beyond that, if the exam-passing strategy is unavoidable in your circumstance? But why even try, here now, with the experience of hearing?

I have various answers to offer to this, but I think it best to focus on one. Let's say, then, that you have a suspicion that you really did not read *Insight* properly, or at least that you could read it better. Not a great problem: I have that suspicion after fifty years of reaching! So, let us find our way back to the first sentence of *Insight*, chapter one, which talks of: Descartes' conviction "that too many people felt it beneath them to direction their efforts to apparently trifling problems." Our problem, What is hearing, might be considered trivial, at least from our point of view. We wish to move forwards, reach a metaphysics. Reach a personal metaphysics? Then you have to take seriously the point we made already, from Lonergan, about moving, in this chapter 15 of *Insight*, "to prepare our statement of the integral heuristic structure that we have named

metaphysics.”¹ But the problem, as I have found in the past forty years, is that a misdirection at the beginning of the preparation can leave one’s eyes and mind gliding over the already out there and familiar words of *Insight*, right from the first page, and certainly within the first chapter.

The preparation demands of us some serious experience of a search for a definition. It need not be a vast challenge. I recall my own favorite beginner’s exercise: write A E F above a line and C D below the line and ask the interested person or group to finish out the series. I have recollections of doing this regularly with students, but occasionally with professors, sometime with the latter puttering for a couple of hours before they **get** the law. Even crossword puzzles are useful. So, here I ask you to take this question, What is hearing?, as a paradigm of your struggle with the challenge of Lonergan’s *Insight*. Like Lonergan’s illustration of, What is a circle?,² you may slip past the challenge with a set of convenient words: “Sounds are audible variations in air pressure”³ sounds and looks good as a start: but what do you, or the text book writer, mean by *audible*?

Now here we must pause over a large and long-term problem. We must advert to a complex of cultural problems, some of which are axial. Untrammelled common sense is on the side of the full concrete meaning of audible.⁴ But common sense in the present western culture, yours perhaps and mine, is trammelled: we are psychically bent towards reductionism. Popular literature helps us along these trammel lines, be it the high level of *Scientific American* or just the daily media. And certainly it haunts textbooks on the life-sciences. We noted a twisted instance of this in the previous essay:

¹*Insight*, 458[484].

²*Insight* 7[31]. I would nudge you to note that the answer to the question carries one into, and beyond, Euclidean geometry. See *Phenomenology and Logic*, 357.

³**Neuroscience**, 351.

⁴Recall *Insight* 441[467]: “appeal to the immemorial convictions of common sense”.

the use of the word *information* in relation to sub-structures of the organism. It is twisted, in that it implicitly denies that the processes of physics and chemistry are **formed**: we must get back to that word presently as well as in later essays. The denial leads to the introduction of information theory, a massively dominant trammeling. The most familiar instance is perhaps the so-commonly-accepted view that the DNA structures contain, code, human phenotypology. But let's not go there in our smaller present struggle. That struggle is to take note of the turns of our own interest and thinking as we read and think about hearing. Do you find yourself thinking, with the text-book writer, in a way that subtly denies the organic forms and has recourse to mythic information-passing?

I invite slow brooding moving here, and so cut off my comments, only asking you to read a little more of whatever text you have on hearing, and find yourself thinking, find your thinking in the superego of its cultural performance. My suspicion is that you will find that thinking muddled. There is one tendency that holds to a commonsense view that, yes, you know what hearing is.⁵ But what then is the stuff in the text about, the chemistry and topology of sub-structures? Is it an explaining away? So you find a mixed general bias in your thinking. Or do you, in the hour or two after this question mark?

That, of course, brings me to the deeper question: am I reaching out soundly here to you, to anyone?

2. Reaching out Soundly

The pun, I hope, helps both of us to identify quite different reachings involved in our efforts. In section one you and I were, at least in my intention, gently investigating

⁵*Insight* 505[528]. “the substitution of a pseudometaphysical mythmaking for scientific inquiry”. Bring the possibility of such mythic thinking to bear on the reading of the word hearing in the forth last line of page 6 of *Method in Theology*. Did you, perhaps, assume that you knew what he was talking about?

the reaching out “soundly” that you and I share with many animals. We are still only at a beginning stage: the reaching out needs the larger context of other outreaches that are commonly named sensibilities, and the still larger contexts of integral reception and response. But here we pause - a pause you may well skip if you are really into the task of section one - to ask whether I am reaching out soundly, and to what audience.

The topic is a massive central topic, but it is as well to take it up even a little here. If I were to name a useful page for present musing it would be page 99 of *Method in Theology*, the last page of the chapter on “Meaning” with its focus on decay. The contrast is between **effete** (line 10) and **effective** (2nd last line) communication. The book *Method in Theology* is Lonergan’s ineffective answer. Our effort here is towards bringing that effort of his into effect, thus lifting the also ineffective *Insight* into global effectiveness. The issue is the unity and efficiency and beauty of what is conventionally named metaphysics. That science “forms a unified whole” if it is, for the most part,⁶ successful in hitting the global streets. Metaphysics, or, within a theism, theology, is a total reaching, and so far in history that reaching has been unsound. That unsoundness takes on the dimensions of a thesis in the eight section of *Insight* chapter seven, on “General Bias.”

A pragmatic lift towards soundness took on the dimension of a thesis in 1969.⁷ That thesis has been ineffective for forty years. Aristotle’s lonely life of *theoria*⁸ was an embrace of the universe: “theoretical understanding, then, seeks to solve problems, to erect syntheses, to embrace the universe in a single view.”⁹ Lonergan’s lonely life in Rome bubbled forward in 1965 to a global answer to Plato’s village problem. It is and

⁶See “Finality, Love, Marriage”, *Collection*, 22, note 16, for Aristotle on this and a pointing to a fuller view involving probability distributions.

⁷The article on functional specialization in *Gregorianum* 50 (1969) 485-505.

⁸See “Mission and Spirit”, *A Third Collection*, 26.

⁹*Insight*, 417[442].

was and is to be, in its fullness, a synthesis, a meshing with the effective *Theoria* of God, who embraces with His whole human science-heart a totality.¹⁰ But we are destined to embrace that totality in a “joyful, courageous, whole-hearted, yet intelligently controlled performance of the task set by world order”¹¹ only as a group, lifted forward by a truth that is a “psychic force that sweeps living human bodies linked in charity.”¹² And perhaps now the words are made fresh when we read: “A science is a unity, and it embraces a totality, because the operations of the scientist, the acts corresponding to his objects, form a unified, interrelated group.”¹³ Each scientist in the Tower of Able¹⁴ is to share the common foundational perspective of the time, the on-going genesis of which is the *per se* task of the global foundational elders.

Obviously we cannot here recall or generate the manner in which each sub-group’s acts mesh in a powerful circuit-relay of street-reaching,¹⁵ but is it not, even in sketched form, a magnificent dream? “Is my proposal utopian? It ask merely for creativity, for an interdisciplinary theory that at first will be denounced as absurd, then will be admitted to be true but obvious and insignificant, and perhaps finally be regarded as so important that its adversaries will claim that they themselves discovered it.”¹⁶

My own dream forward is that eventually, in this decade, some sub-group of

¹⁰A basic stand that informs Lonergan’s Latin works on the Trinity and Jesus.

¹¹*Insight* 700[722].

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Topics in Education*, 160.

¹⁴I refer to the metagram **W3** and its various imagings. See Prehumous 2.

¹⁵The image of a relay-running round the functional specialties is useful here. See Prehumous 2, **W6**. See also the first page of chapter 5 of *ChrISt in History*.

¹⁶I quote the concluding paragraph of Lonergan’s essay, “Healing and Creating in History”, *A Third Collection*, edited by F.E.Crowe, Paulist Press, 1985, 108.

Loneragan students will get to grips with that dream in humble pragmatic reaching and start the stone rolling from Lonergan's tomb.¹⁷

Is my dreaming, meshed in this final enterprise, effective or effete? I would have you muse about this in a manner that would lift your appreciation of the need for Lonergan's Utopia.

So, to whom am I writing here? Primarily, clearly, to a group of readers interested in Lonergan, with the hope that there is within that group a sub-group that will do something about the vision of global collaboration. I recall amusing Fred Crowe back in the 1970s with my slogan that "if something is worth doing then it is worth doing badly". Might you and I do our pathetic bit in this decade?

If I were to pick a functional zone for this essay of mine I would say that it is a part of the conversation that I name **C₅₉**.¹⁸ I am pointing foundationally to tasks to be undertaken by sub-communities in present culture: the psychoanalysts, the zoologists, the botanists, the chemists and physicists. All these, of course, within their own troubled histories, their commitments to research and theory and teaching etc. Will this new twist reach them? Certainly not in my time. How are they to be reached? There are two major ways: first, that people interested in Lonergan's achievements and suggestions face those achievements and suggestions with the naked honesty that is at first just personal but is to gradually become the cyclic contribution of Dialectic Elders. Secondly, there is history's ferment towards a need for division of labor in all areas of inquiry. These people, despite conventional staleness, are lifting themselves towards the need for dividing up their own disciplinary work as well as sorting out their own external relations. But such questions get us into a much larger reflection.

¹⁷Quodlibet 5, "A Simple Reading of *Method in Theology*, 250" places our challenge in the context of Mallarme's *Tomb Poems*.

¹⁸A diagram of the inner communications of functional specialization is given on page 108 of *A Brief History of Tongue*. It is put in a larger context in *ChriSt in History*, chapter 5, "Communications".

So I end abruptly. What I write here, e.g., of hearing, might just get, through you, to someone who is interested in bringing a fresh mood to teaching high-school science. Or it might get, through you, to people who are reading such paragraphs as the paragraph of present interest on *Insight* 464[489] in a mood of *haute vulgarization*: missing, then, the pointing and also misleading the next generations. But, more broadly, I would like to think of you as pausing to fantasize about the effectiveness of a global complex of conversations of the type \mathbf{C}_{xy} . Think, for instance, of the conversation that you or I might have with a group serious about interpreting that single paragraph of Lonergan, with us luminously focused in and on the conversations of type \mathbf{C}_{52} . Would it not fall within a decent probability-schedule of being effective rather than effete? The start of a cycle that would redeem the history of the Lonergan movement's brutal neglect of this chapter, this paragraph, of his work? Eventually reaching those who teach about, and care for, hearing in the generations to come?