

Field Nocturne 25

Proust and the Squid

I mentioned in the previous essay that this one has to do with the foundations of language. Why, then, the odd title? It is the title of a recent book by Maryanne Wolf, whose subtitle is *The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*.¹ Again, I refer back to *Field Nocturnes 4*, at the beginning of which I mentioned that this problem of the foundations of language was “around about”² us from the beginning. For Lonergan, students there is a very elementary way of taking luminous note of this: simply by adverting to the meaning of *foundations* in *Method in Theology*. Then foundations are people. You are a foundation and you are a good foundation to the degree that you are luminous to yourself.³

Now his earlier road to that self-luminousness is the doctrinal writing in *Insight*. “To say it all with the greatest brevity: one has not only to read *Insight* but also to discover oneself in oneself.”⁴ But it does not take much effort to note that “to read *Insight*” presupposes that one has discovered how to read, but - surely it is both strange and obvious now? - one has not discovered what this discovery is or was before reading *Insight*? So: the self as reader is opaque, not luminous. You might like to push on here. That opaqueness is not luminous, nor is **this lack of luminousness** luminous without

¹Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid. The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, {illustrated by Catherine Stoodley}, Harper Collins, New York, 2007. Later I refer to this book simply as **Squid**.

²I would hope that this phrase, *around about*, would have increased in subtle meaning as we moved through the recent *Field Nocturnes*?

³I am merely saying, in a way twisted towards the subject that is you, what Lonergan is saying at the beginning of his chapter on **Foundations** in *Method in Theology*.

⁴*Method in Theology*, 260.

efforts at self-attention.⁵ Shortly I shall get round to the story of the discovery by Helen Keller of words: the story is well-known? Alas, it is not well-known. Yes, it is assumed well-known by and for any cultured truncated subject: we've seen the film, read the book, what North American has not heard of Helen Keller?

We could twist further, perhaps a little uncomfortably. So, you may well recall, and recall well, Lonergan's very biting comment on truncated subjectivity. "The neglected subject does not know himself. The truncated subject not only does not know himself but also is unaware of his ignorance and so, on one way or another, concludes that what he does not know does not exist."⁶ I might have made this the centre of attention in the previous *Nocturne*, but that would have spoiled our present fun - or discomfort. Merleau-Ponty and his muddled colleagues of much more than a millennium are truncated subjects.⁷ The is-question, as a focus of a what question, simply does not exist. Go figure. That is not our topic here: our topic here is honest you

⁵I would have you take time off to brood over Lonergan's powerful statement about what is lacking, beginning with "what is lacking is the cultural mileau" (*Insight*, 535[559]) and ending with "Most of all, what is lacking is knowledge of all that is lacking and only gradually is that knowledge acquired." (*Insight*, 536 [559]). The entire meaning of our effort in this series dances round and about this statement, and I shall return to it in *Field Nocturnes CanTower 117*.

⁶B.Lonergan, "The Subject", *A Second Collection*, 73.

⁷The question might be raised about Lonergan students as truncated subjects. The very substantial flow of comparative work - Lonergan and Derrida, Lonergan and Levinas, whatever - leads me to the suspicion that truncation can too easily survive in such scholarship. In the new cyclic system, of course, comparison is quite firmly placed in the operations of page 250 of *Method in Theology*. That takes the mysterious comparative work out of the oddity of it being done by someone with, What?, a God's eye view?, into the discomfort of someone taking a self-revealing stand. I cannot resist sharing a relevant smile from my reading yesterday, about tortuous comparative work. The essay is by Michael B.Smith on "Two texts on Merleau-Ponty by Emmanuel Levinas" (Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty, edited by Galen A.Johnson and Michael B.Smith, Northwestern University Press, 1990, 53-66). Smith remarks of the two essays, "they are deeply intertextual: they take up the problem of alterity through a text of Merleau-Ponty's, 'The Philosopher and His Shadow' (in *Signs*), which is itself a critical examination of Husserl's treatment of the perception of others" (53). Imagine the progress of physics if this were the style of dealing with the data?

“realizing” - what a phony word! - that you did not notice the fundamental opaqueness in you about words as you read, say that paragraph named **study**, or read the first paragraph of *Insight*.

Surprise, surprise!?

One does not expect beginners of *Insight* to be self-luminous at all. One hopes that there is a chink in their truncated armour. Through that chink can slip the beginnings of self-discovery, but - amazing as it may seem - such genuine readers can battle right on to the end of the book - past our paragraph named **study** - without seriously taking note of that opaqueness at the heart of their enterprise. Lonergan never mentions in the book the exercise necessary to shift that experience from opaqueness to self-luminosity. But he does mention it in *Method in Theology*. “The moment of language in human development is most strikingly illustrated by the story of Helen Keller’s discovery that the successive touches made on her hand by her teacher conveyed names of objects.”⁸ Did he mention it effectively? Here we are not thinking of statistics; we are, you are or should be, thinking of you. Was he effective for you, or did you just read on, instead of taking a month off to figure out what happened to Helen, what happened to you before you were two?

Surely McShane jokes, sez you.

In a later wised-up culture that self-luminosity is to be a possession of and by not only foundational persons but of and by common sense; but that is a distant future. In the present axial muddle only the rare evolutionary sport takes the time to lift language to luminous self-presence. But don’t be embarrassed: even Proust didn’t manage it, nor Collette, nor the entire scholarly group whose interest is precisely linguistics.⁹ And certainly Maryanne Wolf has not managed it. So, sadly, at the heart of her informative

⁸*Method in Theology*, 70.

⁹Two books dealing with this topic, and the great gap in linguistics, are John Benton, *Shaping the Future of Language Studies*, Axial Publishing, 2008 and Philip McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue. From Big Bang to Coloured Wholes*, Axial Publishing, 1998.

book there lies a darkness about something essential. Do I exaggerate? Hear here for yourself.

She doesn't raise the topic till Part II of the book. Here we go, in along quotation, and the issue is what is here, here be what.

"As children's perceptual and attention abilities grow, they engage with the most important precursor of reading, early language development, and with it the pivotal insight that things like ponies and dogs have names. It is an experience in every child's life similar to what Helen Keller must have experienced when she first realized that water - her tactile experience of it - had a name, a label that she could communicate through sign language to everyone. It is what the ancient writers of the Rig Veda recognized: 'The Wise established Name-giving, the first principle of language'. It can be difficult for adults to suspend their own views of the everyday world to realize that very young children don't 'know' each thing in the world has a name. Very gradually, children learn to label the salient parts of their world, usually beginning with the people who care for them. But the realization that everything has its own name typically comes at around eighteen months and is one of the insufficiently noted eureka events in the first two years of life. The special quality of this insight is based on the brain's ability to connect two or more systems to make something new. Underlying the child's epiphany is the young brain's ability to connect and integrate information from several systems: vision, cognition, and language."¹⁰

I have quoted at length here, since I wish us to pause over both this paragraph - call it **wolf** - and our paragraph **study**. Earlier in the book, Wolf leads her reader to a reading of a paragraph of Proust with the remark: "Let me introduce you more concretely to the approach of this book by having you read two of Proust's breath-

¹⁰**Squid**, 83-84.

defying sentences from his book *On Reading*, as fast as you can”¹¹ and at the end of the piece from Proust she adds, “Consider first what you were thinking while reading this passage, and then try to analyze exactly what you did as you read it, including how you began to connect Proust to other thoughts.”¹²

Our effort here is towards reading, not as fast as you can, but as slow as you wish: but that could be the only difference between the two approaches. Or is it? This question and its “entertainment” is laced into my invitation to slowness. We are surely used to this slow entertainment by now? We have been brooding over the paragraph **study** for some space and time.

So you must circle round about these quotations from **Squid**. For a start it is of interest to read Wolf’s paragraph with optimism and enthusiasm. Yes, indeed, “a pivotal insight”. Yes, indeed, “one of the insufficiently noted eureka events in the first two years of life”. What, then, is McShane on about in his implicit criticism?

What I am on about is the lack of an appreciation of the lack. I am reminded of Lonergan’s remark: “until one has made serious progress in logic, one easily mistakes the techniques of logic for the laws of thought.”¹³ If you have made serious progress, over a period of months, “regarding and guarding” the phrase **what is here**, then you find the Squid phrase “insufficiently noted” unsatisfactory, and you find the claim that “this insight is based on the brain’s ability to connect two or more systems to make something new” just does not cut it. If you have not thus progressed, then you find that, yes, Wolf is on the ball: let’s even, perhaps, compare Wolf to Lonergan.¹⁴ Which way do you lean?

¹¹**Squid**, 6. I don’t see the need of quoting the piece from Proust. Any page of Proust provides similar magnificent long sentences.

¹²**Squid**, 7.

¹³*Insight*, 573[596].

¹⁴Are we not back with the problem adverted to in note 7 above?

The basis of the insight is the what-here, where the here certainly includes the brain's flexibilities. The basis of the insight illuminating that insight is the what-here. But the two **what-heres** are different, and the two insights are in different horizons. We need to pause over this. We are reaching round the heart of the problem of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and Wolf and of the future teaching of botany.¹⁵

If we have made even a little nominal progress in the struggle with **what is here**, then you are suspicious of the phrase "the brain's ability to connect". You have become doubtful of the brain's ability to connect, unless you - and Wolf - include the **what there**. I have suggested that we pause over the two paragraphs, **study**, and **wolf**. There are altogether too many possible facets to this pause. For a start, think of both as concerned with an organism called Helen. We begin with the thing for us: I am thinking of the seven-year-old Helen in those five weeks between March 5th and April 7th of 1887. The organism is exhibited to our senses, say, by one of the films, *The Miracle Worker*, supplemented - not very scientific, you might claim - by your imagination and mine. We differentiate the different parts from the outside, from the initial hand-movements of Annie Sullivan on March 5th to the final excited hand movements on April 7th of the organism. In those final hand movements there is observable a pace and a twitching that is identifiable by you and me as a **what-here**. How is it thus identifiable? Because we have been studying a like organism: the one that your mirror image looks at!

Now it is important to cut off mythic tendencies here. Think of an observer of the physics of particle reactions. What is observed is identified by the perspective of the observer, educated enough, let us suppose, to do so within the standard model. The standard model is not observed: it is a verified context. Are the forces between particles observed? No. I am not going to elaborate on that issue here: probably most of my readers are only slimly acquainted with the physics I am talking about. So, back to our organism. Do we, did Annie, observe the forces either of Helen's frustrations during

¹⁵The fuller context here is that of functional collaboration. See *Method in Theology: Revisions and Implementations*, Part One: "Method in Theology and Botany".

those weeks, or the forces of her **what-here** during those minutes after her eureka? “The moment when she first caught on was marked by the expression of profound emotion and, in turn, the emotion bore fruit in so powerful an interest that she signified her desire to learn and did learn the names of about twenty objects in a very short time.”¹⁶ But no one observed these emotions, these namings. Did she not signify her desire to learn?

What is seemingly flowing past your eyes and the eyes of your pet, watching the film with you, is a “given containing differences”, and “the given is equally valid in all its parts but differently significant in different parts.”¹⁷ Desire is, then, signified, not to the pet, but to you. So, you and I identify Helen as in a dynamics of puzzling, whatting. And, if we were sophisticated and well-equipped neuroscientist, we could gradually, as graduates, venture inside without “dissection or anatomy.”¹⁸ We could brain-scan endlessly and internationally, locating slowly the **here** and **there** of different words, different languages, in Helens and Ho Wangs and Hottentots.

I digress for two paragraphs now to meet the question, What of the basic text, **Neuroscience**? As it happens I can quote from it in seeming nice continuity with the end of the previous paragraph. “Despite differences of syntax, from the English spoken in the House of Lords to the dialects of aboriginal tribes around the globe, all languages convey the subtleties of human experience and emotion. Consider the fact that no mute tribe of people has ever been found, not even in the remotest corner of the world. Many believe this is a consequence of the fact that the human brain has evolved special language-processing systems. These systems are present in newborn babies; if the child grows up in a normal language environment, he or she inevitably learns to speak and understand language. Consistently with this idea, it has been found that children

¹⁶*Method in Theology*, 70.

¹⁷*Insight*, 382[406].

¹⁸*Insight*, 464[489].

acquire language in a similar manner in all cultures.”¹⁹

Apart from that paragraph, the book has little to say that is not just the usual brain-locating stuff. In the two previous pages one finds the remarks, “Human language is a remarkably complex, flexible, and powerful system for communication that involves the creative use of word according to the rules of systematic grammar”²⁰ and “language is a system by which sounds, symbols and gestures are used for communication.”²¹ And there are the remarks quoted in the notes. That’s it. What of “the key feature”, the “creative use”? This slipping-past reminds me of Joan Robinson’s comment on first year economics slipping past key problems, so that eventually the student becomes a professor and slips right along. But you see my, our, problem? “What is lacking is the cultural mileau.”²² How do we break forward from that lack? Our effort and our paragraph, **study**, and the paragraph, **wolf**, have to roll forward in and into the cyclic collaboration the core of which is that other page of interest, page 250 of *Method in Theology*.²³

Let us get back to the third last paragraph, where you were **what-here** in the print, perhaps thinking of the film, *The Miracle Worker*. And thinking, with attention on the two organisms Helen and you and the two paragraphs, **study** and **wolf**. At least

¹⁹**Neuroscience**, 640.

²⁰**Neuroscience**, 638. The statement occurs in a “box” which raises the question, “Is Language Unique to Humans?” Of course, the book does not **raise the question here** either in writer or, I suspect, in “normal” (truncated) reader.

²¹**Neuroscience**, 639. This is the second sentence in the treatment of “Language and the Brain”. The previous sentence refers back to the “box” mentioned in the previous note. Our use of language - the fact that we have a brain sophisticated enough for language - is one of the key features that distinguishes humans for other animals.”

²²*Insight*, 535[559].

²³*A Brief History of Tongue* deals with this, in chapter 3, in the context of the same shambles at the core of linguistic studies. John Benton’s book, *Shaping the Future of Language Studies*, is a much richer venture into the relevant data on the mess.

you can notice now that **Squid**, with talk of a pivotal insight insufficiently noted, is more on the ball than our standard text. But what of your noting of this pivotal insight? Might your noting blossom into a magnificently full self-possession, displacing you uncomfortably from this cultural milieu of child studies and philosophy and the shambles of education from kindergarten to graduate studies? Eventually these questions are to become present in brutal luminosity when the cyclic collaboration emerges as a global cultural challenge to present truncation and malice. And on the road to that emergence there lies the challenge to write, and the writing, of a book of the caliber of *Insight*, but taking its start, not from Archimedes - who, in any event, has been comfortably slipped past by most readers - but from Helen Keller.

Might you meet some such challenge, articulated bluntly by me? I pose that question thus, existentially, to give you a taste of the larger global discomfort of **Neuroscience** writers of a hundred years or so, who might still be hanging on to their stupidities, systematically distorting and destroying the lives of children and teenagers and graduates and oldies. The dialectic of history will relentlessly reveal, perhaps not in a hundred but, say, in a million years or so, that such people are simply absent from themselves and life, simply not with **it**, where **it** is **what-here-now**.

Existentially, no doubt, you are busy. But might that business, busyness, be an absence from life, from **what-here-now**? Might you cope with the business of that busyness in the mood of the unjust steward and turn towards your what to discover words and world in a way that was beyond Helen Keller?

I am pointing towards the finer life, towards that embrace of mind and minding that Aristotle and Lonergan wrote about, the theoretic life that embraces the cosmos.²⁴ The embrace is to be a massively sexy cosmic embrace of which Colette would approve.²⁵ It is a remote possibility but to be upgraded to less slim probabilities by

²⁴*Insight*, 417[442].

²⁵I am thinking here of *Colette: the world's flesh*, the biography by Julia Kristeva.

global cyclic collaboration in these next millennia. Might you at least shake yourself out of the present cultural mileau to not just laud the great men of the past, but to encourage the great and lonely women of the present? “Common sense is concerned not with remote but with proximate possibilities. It lauds the great men of the past, ostensibly to stir one to emulation, but really to urge one to modesty. It remarks that, it there are unsolved problems, and, no doubt there are, at least men of undoubted genius have failed to solve them. It leaves to be inferred that, unless one is a still greater genius, then one had best regard such problems as practically insoluble.”²⁶

I am not here asking the impossible, but rather simple high-school level attention to your battered and abused what-here. We turn to an invitation to that effort in the next *Field Nocturne*. In *Field Nocturne 27* I shall have a shot twisting that invitation beyond the **speak** of the present cultural mileau. What might that twisting be? It is to surprise you, but only if you face quietly and insistently into a focal dark-dream of **hear-here-what**. It is to surprise history in a third and fourth stage of meaning.²⁷ And so I conclude here, hopefully, with the end-words of the final chapter of my book, *Process*, of twenty years ago. No doubt you have read those words before, for I quote them to me and you regularly and still freshly as I try to write the future. I had little idea, when I first wrote them, of the statistical-schedules of the emergence of the territorial-oddity, *The Tower of Able*.

“The third stage of global meaning, with its mutual mediation of an academic presence, is a distant probability, needing painfilled solitary reaching towards a hearing

²⁶*Insight*, 417[442].

²⁷On the fourth stage of meaning, see *Field Nocturnes CanTower 42*, “the Fourth Stage of Meaning”.

of hearing,²⁸ a touching of touching, “in the far ear”,²⁹ “sanscreed”,³⁰ making luminously present - in focal darkdream - our bloodwashed blood stream. It is a new audicity, a new hapticity, to which we must aspire, for which we must pray.”³¹

²⁸“Merced Mulde!”, “Yesel that the limmat?” (*Finnegans Wake*, p. 212, line 26; p. 199, line 13).

²⁹See John Bishop, *Joyce’s Book of the Dark: Finnegans Wake*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1986, 343-46.

³⁰*Finnegans Wake*, p. 519.

³¹*Process: Introducing Themselves to Young (Christian) Minders*, Written 1988-89 ,and available on the usual Website. I have reduce the footnotes here. Also note the bracketing of Christian: but that final paragraph has obviously Christian undertones: don’t let them put you off your secular calling.