

Field Nocturne 27

Helen. Troy Again. Fail Better.

You recall, I hope, the Beckett pointing quoted occasionally already: “No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better”. We are beyond half-way now in our seemingly simple enterprise and the simplicity has vanished, certainly for me. The paragraph **study** needs a much larger context, and massive changes of culture, and in particular new twist of language, if it is to be effectively operative. The same, indeed, is true of the entire book *Insight*, and of the entire book, *Verbum*. A central issue is the meaning of seeing, and we touched on that very early, but we did not venture into Neuroscience on the topic. That I intend to do, however briefly, in Field Nocturne 33, “Seeing **Neuroscience** chapters 9,10,” which I preface with the broader reflection of Field Nocturnes 32, “Seeing is Deceiving”. But then I abandon the effort to point to a fresh reading of **Neuroscience**, inviting you still to get a grip on that inner meaning of you, the organism, if you are to move forward ontogenetically and phylogenetically.

You obviously could not know that I am thinking now, with those two namings of the problem of genesis, of the ending of the entire project, and especially the essays 115 and 116, on those two topics, completed this week.. So, I give a final pointing to the task that is the reading of study, but spread myself into larger encouragements, greater problematics. Indeed, this morning it seemed to me that this series might well be put, not parallel to Cantowers 1- 41 as a lead-in to FNC 42-117, but as a series to follow FNC 117. And of course it can be thus read, a Beginagain Awake: the topic of Field Nocturne 29. But let us get on with the present ramble.

1.Fail Better

You think immediately of the Helen of the previous *Field Nocturne*, but might we not think of Helen of Troy? And might we not be thinking of all the searching women

of history?¹ Was Helen of Troy trapped and shrunken by Homer? Was Helen Keller trapped and shrunken by John Benton, or myself? These questions point us towards quite different cultural contexts and issues, and it would take a mighty effort to show effectively, or even make plausible, the future existence of a postmodern antifoundational perspective that would control and link the meaning of all these questions. Such an effort is quite beyond our little enterprise here: and we are now two thirds of the way through. Yet it seems worthwhile giving some impression of it, for completeness here.

Needless to say, this was not part of the original project. I was indeed over optimistic in thinking that I might somehow lift such book as **Neuroscience** into a new context, the beginnings of a seriously-empirical presence of generalized empirical method. Still, I think that I managed to give some pointers, some twists towards self-attention, towards a new strange realism in our approach to ourselves as students of plants and mice and women. And found myself moving forward rapidly to a fuller perspective on the untimely earliness of our struggle with the meanings of plants and people. It seems to me now important to say more on that rather than pushing further on details of **Neuroscience**. The bridge to that “more” comes from the pointings of Field Nocturnes 23 and 24, where I open up the topic to feminist reflections and to Merleau-Ponty’s final struggle. They are brought together here, in an odd way, by Helen Keller, in her initial blind struggle towards word, towards language. Merleau-Ponty struggles with the meaning of touch - the central topic of Field Nocturne 28 - and Helen Keller’s struggle towards **word** was a struggle with the meaning of touch: “what is Annie doing in her touching?”: where there were no words in that question. Field Nocturne 26 gives you what I call orthodox directives towards sharing that struggle of Helen. I wonder how many of you followed up those directive? Not too many, I suspect, in this present culture. A sad fact: one would not expect adequate attention to Helen from

¹See, for the search in poetry, Jane Hirstfield (ed)., *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1994)

contemporary linguists and students of childhood, but the neglect within the community of Lonergan students of that basic insight is mildly astonishing.

At all events, larger questions kept bubbling up as we move beyond the half-way stage of my little study of the paragraph on study. We seemed to be dealing with a simple problem of viewing a paragraph of Lonergan on the study of plants, but what of “Colette in her cult of plant blossomings”?² Who is reading what, who is writing of what? And I note that the question mark there can be dropped, lifting us back to our context of **herewhat**. Our elementary venture of reading **study** linked with the challenge of Cosmopolis: but we already noted that in the first few Nocturnes. We cannot then be too surprised.

Many possible directions emerged. Most immediately is the problem of reexpressing what I call “The Helen-challenge” in something like a new language, twisting Joyce’s Bloom and Wake round Colette’s lush plantings to point to a new possession of the world. “Writing, therefore, has no autonomous existence; It is part of the monogram of the world, embroidered by the ‘tendrils of the vine,’ but the pure and the impure, and by animals at peace. The alphabet writes the world, and the world comes to pass through the alphabet: writing and world coexist as the two aspects of a single experience, for this woman who writes in a state of feverish rapture that defies language (‘Fever is the beginning of what one does not name’).”³

Such a direction would be exciting, even feverish, but it would be a strange new venture. I have troubled people enough with oddities of style and the odd neologism: a *Finnegans Wake* from me around the wordwake of Helen would not at all meet present needs. The present need that, so to speak, stares me in the face, is the need for a turn towards luminosity about over-stressing initial meanings. What I mean by that is elusive: that is the whole pointing of the need, and the pointing is to be the effort of

²Colette, 426.

³Colette, 2.

Field Nocturne 30, "Onwords". It is a need that emerges from the studies and the writings of psychoanalysis: I think here of one of Julia Kristeva's heroines, Melanie Klein, but it seems best to illustrate the problem and the need in question from Lonergan's elementary reflections on Freud and Jung. It is a need that emerges from pausing over Merleau-Ponty in the previous Nocturne, supplemented by attention to him in the next Nocturne. Furthermore, it is a need that I dealt with previously, but now I envisage it and the solution to its underlying problems altogether more clearly.

Furthermore, the direction I take fits present needs in this series and satisfies the move to the fuller perspective of *Field Nocturnes CanTower*.⁴ Here, it seems proper to give some further attention to sensibility as it is treated by **Neuroscience**, and I shall do that by moving from our reflections on the sense of touch to the mess of problems that surround the sense of seeing. We are, then, back with the problem raised earlier in various ways, the problem of a communal finding of "the position", the position that is operative in you and me and Helen and Merleau-Ponty. Some elementary puttering with the neurodynamics of seeing certainly is not going to lift us out of present muddles regarding objectivity, but there is a future lift to be glimpsed in such putterings. Humans, and certainly the Tower people in the third and fourth stages of meaning, are destined to rise towards a control of the meaning of seeing.

Where does all this leave our reading of **study**? Certainly it should flex our fantasy regarding future writing and reading by both sexes about weeds and willows.

⁴I do not wish to enlarge on this here. *Field Nocturnes CanTower 44*, [I abbreviate the general title as **FNC** henceforth] already on the website as the first of that new series, already sketched out directions. But the first and second of that new series, continuing both the Cantowers, which series stopped at number 41, and this series, FNC 42 and FNC 43, will spell out hopes and possibilities. There is the hope that eventually that series leads to a communal heuristic grip on the transformation by functional collaboration of the achievement of *Insight* chapter 17. The Tower Community is to be the core of that climb and that achievement: so there is a simple meaning to the title of the new series. Field Nocturnes are those that reach for the explanatory darkness of the Field: they are to do so in a manner that is, statistically effective, giving a radiance to cultural searchings both in the Tower of Able and on the Plains of Abraham.

Willows and women, mice and men, are to be read and cherished in a way quite beyond present fantasy.

It is important to pause over that conclusion. Yes, indeed, it is a matter of going beyond present fantasy if we are to glimpse distant possibilities, open ourselves to a new scientific revolution and a revolution of language. The going beyond is not to be just casual dreaming, but methodological: “the ongoing genesis” that Lonergan wrote of more and more in his later years relates to a precise functional of foundational thinking and to, say, a powerful push through a critical genetics of language. That is not my topic here: I see it in fantasy, but also within the heuristics of the Standard Model that is not at present standard, one that is lifted towards the future by the full heuristic possession of and by the metagrams of methods, which is particularly energizing by the heuristic of a critical genetic symbolically expressed as UV + GS. I have drawn attention to our failure, but when the failure is fitted into a fuller heuristics the failure emerges as better, the past appears better than it was. Why have we failed? Why does an 8-month old baby fail to walk? Because it is too young. In its next effort it will, perhaps, fail better.

2. Troy Again

But the UV + GS symbolized is part of that failing better, illuminating it. The symbols and their lightening power probably mean very little to you as you read of them here, even if you have traced their meaning back to various previous discussions of mine. And if you track back to sources in Lonergan then you find yourself - “*experto crede*”⁵ - in the problem of meshing Lonergan’s hints about genetic method with his more complex and obscure writing on interpretations, its canons, its transformation through functional specialization. I myself, after fifty odd, very odd, years see my own reaching of that component of the Standard Model of the next century as the high point

⁵I recall Lonergan’s remark, *For A New Political Economy*, 112.

of my Cantower project, indeed as the topic of that last essay, Cantower 117. Can you vaguely imagine the mesh of genetic method as it is sketched with brutal simplicity in chapter 15 of *Insight*, with the dense *Sketch* and canons of reading and reading forward of chapter 17?⁶ What might you imagine that mesh to be? We all need to Try Again, but in collaborative humility. It is not just a matter of “Troy again” in re-reading Homer etc to reach a better glimpse of the Greek discovery - or non-discovery - of mind. It is a matter of reading the global past regarding signing and the ordering of signing, and reading that emergence within the “try again” infantile searchings of present neurodynamic linguistics. So, you might envisage, as I recall in luminous hours in the Indian Institute in Oxford, not just Troy but Panini: the turn of failure he gave to expression and its control. But I recall Oxford too because there was an optimism to my musings there. I recall vividly the day in the Old Bodleian Library when I saw the volumes of history of economics freshly, being, as it were, read years later by luminous minds: they would read within a luminosity not only regarding themselves but regarding the essential economic variables in a manner that would be massively forward-looking yet also gently kind to the past’s failures.

But I am opening up topics here that are quite beyond our little effort at reading **study**, at trying to read **study** and ourselves and the sunflower. And the real point of this short section is the pointing toward a present possibility of optimism, apart but not separate from the fuller optimism about the longer cycles of incline. Then you can notice and cherish that I have brought you a little distance towards glimpsing and realizing a new presence meshed with expressions of it. I write to you, and address you suggestively as **whathere**. I recalled for you my nudging of schoolboys in that direction simple by writing on the board, **What** is a schoolboy, without a question mark. And so on. Simple devices of feedback. Have they not worked a little? I expect failures of course: I have a long history of failures, especially with the over-thirty age-range. Only

⁶See further *FNC 115*, “Ontogenetics”.

recently a colleague wrote to me in surprise, a surprise that I found self-enlightening, that he and his friends had just noticed that page 250 of *Method* was asking them about **them**

But it can also be a problem for the twenty year old. Occasionally a student would come to a course of mine in Mt. St. Vincent University after doing a first year of philosophy at Dalhousie University. He - it was regularly he - had already been disorientated. Philosophy was about viewpoints: I was offering another viewpoint that he could get in control of, like the map of a new city.

Might I add that the difficulty with Lonergan's view is that it is a well-constructed elementary map? So, people can get into the naming of its elements quite easily, but unwittingly. Perhaps I have rescued you from that in our tiny tumbles towards the first walks of self-possession? That you truly find your self at the beginning, in the beginnings of a luminous self- possession, perhaps even a self-possession in history? Or at least a self-possession in your autobiography, so that your past looks better than it was? And perhaps I can be optimistic about your further reading of introductory neuropsychology and introductory botany? Would I be madly optimistic to think of you extending those seed of new reading to others and to their creations. What is *The Thinker* a statue of?

So, I move on now, at a new pace, being much more tuned, after this effort, to the fact that what is at issue is not 300 pages on "the study of the organisms" but 300 years of babbling and baby- talk in these realms. But even you and I suspecting that, in our different ways, is of great benefit, and it is the main challenge of the Nocturnes to follow. There is a sense, a consoling sense, in which I am recycling, trolling and trying again along. What is seeing? **What** is seeing. Yes. Of course: seeing print **what here**. But a what who cannot see or hear can still touch and be touched. Is there an advantage in sharing further time with that life, the life of Helen? So there is the invitation to do what I had thought of doing here, but at great length: translating Field Nocturne 26 into a new language, a language of subjectivity, a *Helensawake*. Might you

try that, organism in the dawn sun?

And there is also, of course, begging in the wings to be freshly cherished, Troy-folk and Pannini, Homer and Hesiod, Moses and Mo Ti, waiting for re-incarnation in a new world of words.