

Field Nocturne 41

What are we up to?

The question, of course, is delightfully ambiguous. Yes, what have we been up to here; but, also, are we up to moving forward within this dynamic, at the heart of which there is the molecular bent towards the study of the organism that is me, indeed towards the study of the organism to which my desire belongs, a desire undistanced.

Are you up to it? And what have you been up to in the reading of these *Nocturnes*? We are, of course, back at the questions raised by the first three essays in the present series: Lonergan's clearest and obscurest challenge and the task of the putting together of them. The putting together of them is a problem of history: your part in that zeal of history may be great or small, one of just nudging others, or one of leading sufferingly in the brain and heart of the matter. History is up to it, in its "yearning for God,"¹ a yearning that reaches to "include the sensible data,"² brain-borne, in the later luminous journey, and in the final unending arrival. But that part of the story is a fantasy, to be fermented, of the later third stage of meaning, a fantasy moreover to be reached and shared only by patient and prayerful effort.

My quotation just now from *Insight* is from that powerful ten pages about collaboration,³ the identity of which collaboration was totally obscure to the Lonergan of 1953, apart from his sense of its gentle gracefulness and the heuristics of it at the end of chapter 7.

It has been identified now for over forty years: surely the mustard seed deserves its place in the sun before this millennium runs out?

So we have the discomfiting question of *Assembly*, "what have I been up to in

¹*Insight*, 724[745].

²*Ibid.*

³*Insight*, Chapter 20, section 5.

perusing or pondering through these Nocturnes?"⁴ Perhaps I see a task that I am not up to, given my time and talents. Perhaps I have the madness of a Stephen McKenna who, meeting the *Enneads*, wrote in his diary, "this is worth a life"? But I would suspect that for all, including my elderly self, there is an issue of doing better, of repentance. Should I quote now the page that is the focus of my present attention? In the first two Nocturnes I brought us to attend to those two pages, *Insight* 464[489] and *Method in Theology* 250, and the latter page certain is a present focus, as we turn the page from *Assembly*. But I would invite us now to take as context, to take for prayer and pondering, that powerful page that is led into by the mention of embrace: embracing the solution; embracing the order of the universe.⁵ And does the mention of *embrace* not remind you of that other challenge to embrace that I named *The Tomega Principle*: "Theoretical understanding, then, seeks to solve problems, to erect syntheses, to embrace the universe in a single view."⁶

This is not the **theoretical understanding** of present axial conventions: it is a loving mindful embrace of particles and plants, pain and poverty, peace. So, at all events, I mesh this third page into the challenge of the other two that have been our focus all along. There is the issue of love leading to repentance, to sorrow, to joy, to fresh operative good will.

I dare focus this broad issue now, in addressing Lonergan students that I have managed to nudge towards personal *Assembly*, and on down that page 250 towards "indicating the view that would result from developing what he (she) has regarded as positions and by reversing what he (she) regarded as counter-positions." The daring

⁴The word *Assembly* ends page 249 of *Method in Theology*.

⁵*Insight*, 699[721]. The page I am pointing to is the next page, 700[722]. They both end, conveniently, with the words "wills that order's dynamic joy and zeal." The new edition has two extra lines at the beginning, with the second mention of *embrace* to which I refer.

⁶*Insight*, 417[442].

focus is “the general bias of common sense,”⁷ and the problem of climbing out of it brain-wise. Here it is as well to recall one of Lonergan’s expressions of the problem. It occurs in his paper “Healing and Creating in History,”⁸ which is worth pausing over for a couple of hours or weeks at this stage: it is, after all, our central topic. But I put it here the pointing here in a simple blunt question: Which is worse: being disoriented by the clever and wicked or by the righteous and stupid? The topic is massive, and at present I am merely skimming over one aspect: the Christian righteousness that goes with the retreat of the Church from progress in understanding. It is a retreat that Lonergan summed up in conversation with me in Easter 1961 with his remark about “big frogs in little ponds.”⁹ It was manifest to him during his years of training as it was to me in my own Jesuit years. But the broad effect of it was to allow general bias to eat up the effort to understand seriously, even to excuse itself from such an effort. Nowhere does Lonergan use the term *theoretical* conversion - it is my own invention - but he took it for granted as a given and a necessity.¹⁰ What he was “up to” all his life was the following of his later advice, “understand; understand systematically,”¹¹ which finally blossom into pointers regarding the ongoing genesis of genetic systems of systems that is to be the future structure of global minding.

⁷*Insight*, 700[722].

⁸The paper is available as Part Two of *Collected Works*, Volume 15, on Macroeconomic Dynamics, and also in *A Third Collection*.

⁹The point is made quite clearly on page 317 of *Method in Theology*: three basic changes have occurred in the past five centuries”churchmen have no real apprehension of the nature of these changes”.

¹⁰I have written about this psychic context of Lonergan in chapter one of Part Three of Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*.

¹¹The point is mad in various writings of the Roman period, most clearly in *De Intellectu et Methodo*, “*On Understanding and Method*”.

But his advice - e.g. his advice about the bridge of an understanding space-time¹² - fell on deaf clerical ears in the early surge of interest in *Insight*. And in the later surge of interest in his tired old descriptive book *Method in Theology*, his descriptive effort was mistaken for a new slant, even a cosier slant: the move was back into the little pond, armed with a few new slogans about precepts and conversions. There will be, of course, books written about this story: indeed, the story has to emerge in initial efforts to crawl down page 250 of *Method*. What I give here is merely a tincture of a hint of my dialectic stand.

So, what have you been up to, what are you up to? Have you, perhaps, fallen among thieves, serial killers as I called them once, teachers who lead and led you away from the longing to embrace the universe understandingly? And perhaps now, in your middle years, you are not up to the effort? Then you are relieved, even in your repentance, of the burden of serious understanding, but not of the burden of redirecting present and later strugglers. Furthermore, you may be one of those present strugglers, yet not talented with a molecular loneliness for serious theoretic meaning. Then you must find - as the older failures must find - a modest aesthetic way of incarnating a clasp of mystery that would lift you out of a mythic everydayness.

So, back to the question of *Assembly*. What I have been doing in these few pages is adding the question of theoretic conversion to the assembly problem of page 250 of *Method*, and indeed I might well digress to add the question of aesthetic and vital conversions, and to comment on the mess surrounding the *Assembly* and *Classification of intellectual positionings*. I am not re-writing *Method* - a task for some future group that would provide a voluminous guide to *Global Praxis* - but pattering around useful pointers to individuals and groups who gasp for authenticity.

That gasp may be the modest gasp of limited talent: then, thanking God for the limitation, you are relieved of the burden of seriously thinking prayer, though not of

¹²The pointer is given in the first paragraph of *Insight* chapter 5.

the burden of supporting and encouraging others in their climb, in this life, towards the *Theoria* that is the Word of God. Nor would it be surprising to find, in later generations, that limited talent can climb to new cultures of seriousness and enlightenment, of Mystery and Speaking.

But back to the question of *Assembly* and its five *Italicized* mates of page 250 of *Method*. Back, indeed, to my previous efforts to draw attention to that massive cultural challenge: for I see no point in repeating myself. Were I to recommend a single existential reading here it would be of *Quodlibet 8*, “The Dialectic of My Town, *Ma Vlast*”. It is an invitation to do walk-about for a week or a lifetime around your block and your blocks.¹³

Most of my present readers will not, nor indeed perhaps need not, follow up on the cherishing of their own brain that I have been writing about here. They may, nonetheless, be relatively eloquent about some of the related topics. No harm in that, as long as their eloquence is vibrant with a certain nescience and mysteriousness. “What is consciousness?” asks an eager student or a precocious child. You may give the answer from *Insight*, “By consciousness is meant an awareness immanent in cognitional acts.”¹⁴ But you will be locked blindly into the gross unrepentantness of the pond of popular and pretentious talk if you mistake that descriptive noise for guidance to enlightenment.

There is the deeper sense of *being locked blindly* that we mused over at the end of *Field Nocturne 39*: locked blindly into an exigence for the Explanation of God, that places consciousness, now and everlastingly, in a new and ever-new context and

¹³I have given brief commentaries on two of such walkabouts: a walk-about in New York, of which I wrote in *Cantower 14*; the Dublin walk-about in Dublin 2004 which gave rise to *Quodlibet 8*, mentioned in the text. The immediate context of that walkabout was a type of shocked state after the strange inhuman flood of papers presented in the Centennial celebration of Lonergan’s birth.

¹⁴*Insight* 322[346].

community of meaning. "It is an experience of a transformation one did not bring about but rather underwent, as divine providence let evil take its course and vertical finality be heightened, as it let one's circumstances shift, one's dispositions change, new encounters occur, and - so gently and quietly - one's heart be touched. It is the experience of a new community, in which faith and hope and charity dissolve rationalizations, break determinisms, and reconcile the estranged and the alienated, and there is reaped the harvest of the Spirit that is 'love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control' (*Gal. 5:22*)"¹⁵ It is to blossom into an everlasting flight of fancy.¹⁶ In the next millennium it may have no more than a Poisson Curve of global probabilities. In a billion years of Minding and minding, could there not be a Normal Law distribution, in a leisured dominance of the fourth stage of meaning?

¹⁵The Conclusion to Lonergan, "Mission and Spirit", *A Third Collection*, 33.

¹⁶See *FNC 116*, "Desire Undistanced: Part Two: Phylogenesis"