

Field Nocturnes CanTower 42

The Dismal Failure of Lonergan Studies

I picked this title for my short essay in order to attract attention! I could well have called it, “For a New Political Theology,” nudged by the number 42 to recall that powerful neglected Lonergan essay of 1942, “For A New Political Economy”. Obviously, I have your attention for these few lines, so please stay with me for the three pages. Don’t let the Series title, abbreviated below as **FNC**, bother you. But I hope that the words, *Dismal Failure*, as a particular title, got to you somehow: annoyance, curiosity, sadness, amusement.

If I am to be brief I cannot venture into the dismal failure here. From the point of view of broader culture, Lonergan is just not with it. And, to my mind and from my position, one central reason is that Lonergan’s disciples are not “with Lonergan” in his final brilliant tuning into crises of our times, collaboration and elderhood: Richard Branson has it right, and *Wikinomics*.¹

For some years now, indeed for over 40 years, I have tried unsuccessfully to draw attention to Lonergan as foster-father of a collaborative movement of which history is to be mother: a movement of global collaboration. My colleagues manage to ignore that pressure, from history, from Lonergan, from Fred Crowe, from me, by carrying on in old isolated ineffective ways of paper writing and conference gatherings. They bring to mind Lonergan’s conversational remarks in Dublin, Easter 1961, about “big frogs in little ponds”. He was talking about post-Tridentine theology but his summary comment is discomfortingly suited to present Lonerganism.

Functional collaboration was and is his way out. I cannot argue this here: my

¹See the internet for Richard Branson’s Elders project beginning in 2007. The other reference above is to *Wikinomics. How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, Portfolio (a branch of Penguin), 2006.

website contains sufficient variations on the theme.² It took him a dozen years to figure out that structure as solving the problem of cosmopolis identified in *Insight*. Surely, if we respect the man and his ideas, that final great idea deserves respect, even implementation? “Is my proposal utopian? It asks 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 finally be regarded as so important that its adversaries will claim that they themselves discovered it.”³ Lonergan’s senior disciples do not have the courage to denounce the functional suggestion as absurd, but they do so equivalently by treating functionality as merely a sort of simple filing system for their old-style writings and talkings. It is not a filing system, nor is it simple: it points to a massive global geohistorical anti-foundational postmodernism that promises to meet the issues of the new millennium and the next millennia in a humble human fashion. But it demands the serious thinking that would lift us into historic sympathy with the Word, The Practical Theory, of God.⁴ It thus demands differentiations of consciousness quite beyond present Lonergan students.

At 77 I wonder, Might we make a start in my lifetime? But what has this to do with this essay, this series? There is already on my website an essay in the series, *FNC 44*, that locates the new series in the context of the old *Cantower* series halted after 41 essays - in hopes of a suggested collaboration that failed - and in the wake of another series of 41 essays dealing with the adequate reading of that single paragraph of *Insight*

²A convenient start is my Website book of 2007, *Method in Theology. Revisions and Implementations*. The website is www.philipmcshane.ca.

³The Conclusion to “Healing and Creating in History”, an essay available both in *A Third Collection* and in volume 15 of *Collected Works*.

⁴I write of the heart of this seriousness in Part Three, chapter one, of Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*. The work is as yet incomplete, but will appear in English and French in 2009, and later, I would hope, in other languages. A fairly complete draft of my own part, however, is available on request.

on the study of the organism⁵ - and I note that the organism in question can be anything from the sunflower to the flowering of the Mystical Organism, God's Wordplan, a flowering that is to be Sonflowered in the Eschaton. In *FNC 44* I anticipated that I would move forward, in 2008-2011, from these two series to the present series of 76 essays. I hurried that series of 76 essays to a conclusion, rounded off by a strategy described in *FNC 43*: the million-word project of 117 *Cantowers* is now complete. I rushed to complete the series because of new possibilities of collaboration. Such a possibility is the November 1st 2008 weekend meeting at Concordia University, and July 6 - 10, 2009, will witness a fresh beginning in St. Mary's University, Halifax, Canada, where the topic is "Global Functional Collaboration". The swift ending of the series, then, was related to freeing myself for collaboration.

The collaboration is to be omnidisciplinary in its global networking. Karl Rahner was astute in noting unambiguously, from his reading of Lonergan's 1969 essay, that "Lonergan's theological methodology seems to me to be so generic that it actually suits every science."⁶ Such diverse fields as economics, linguistics, and musicology have within them the battered reach of history for that functional collaboration and functional intertwining.⁷

I restrict myself in this essay to three pages and to a single **advocacy**.⁸ Please

⁵*Insight* 464[489]. The new series is titled "Field Nocturnes".

⁶Rahner is responding to the version of chapter 5 of *Method* published in the 1969 *Gregorianum*. "Die theologische Methodologie Lonergan's scheint mir so generisch zu sein, dass sie eigentlich auf jede Wissenschaft passt", Karl Rahner, "Kritische Bemerkungen zu B.J.F.Lonergan's Aufsatz: 'Functional Specialties in Theology'", *Gregorianum* 51(1971), 537.

⁷I have touched on this need in economics: chapter 5 of *Economics for Everyone*, and chapter 3 of *A Brief History of Tongue*, both from Axial Publishing in recent years. Musicology (now chapter two of *The Shaping of the Foundations*, available on the website) was my first venture, the year of the publication of Lonergan's *Gregorianum* article: 1969. The functional intertwining is a more complex matter. See chapter seven of the book mentioned in note 2.

⁸There is the larger **advocacy**. "By **advocating** a distinct functional specialty named dialectic"(*Method*, 153, note 1), at home in page 250 of *Method*, within the cycle of specialties.

pause over my suggestion of **dismal failure** and brood over the non-attention to functional specialization in the past forty years. Have you suggestions, or the time and energy for collaboration? I think of pushing forward with a final series, but I am tired of talking to myself. I appeal now to different generations, and different levels of competence. I have invited retirees to come alive, answering the Beatle's question "Will they be needing me, will they be feeding me, when I'm sixty four?"⁹ I invite commonsense folk to venture forwards in more modest ways.¹⁰ And then there are the battered people, doing theses or beginning a teaching career, both types suffering the subtle offer of mental death: you must play the horrid game. But might we not all, in our own way, do something about the dismal failure?

⁹My essay, "The Importance of Rescuing Insight" in *The Importance of Insight: Essays in Honour of Michael Vertin*, edited by John J.Liptay and David S.Liptay, University of Toronto Press, 2007, is on the topic.

¹⁰The invitation is best expressed in the series of 13 essays *Eldorede* - an Elder's plain speaking from my time in Korea and Australia in 2007 - now neatly identified as **FNC 101**.