

Aspiring Models and Dead Time

“A conversation with one shrink involves some dead time. A conversation between two involves a lot of dead time.”¹

I wish to keep my musings here simple, but I note immediately various suggestive aspects of my title. *Dead Time*, here, refers mostly to the period in history that I call *Axial*.² But it could refer to post-pilgrim existence, and allusions to that may be sniffed in what follows. Again, *Aspiring Models* in this essay is a creative replacing—but without elimination—of my notion of *standard model* in this previous decade. But there are rich layers of references in both words. *Aspiring* could bring to mind various literary traditions e.g. of Gustave Flaubert’s *La Spirale*³ or Ezra Pound’s Vorticist

¹ Stephen White, *Dead Time*, Signet pb, 2009, 132. Quoted here later as *Dead Time*. This strange final essay is, in a deep sense, only the idea of an essay, a series of books, an ethos. You might think of it as a idea of a counterpoint pointing, a fugue: of Bing Crosby and David Bowie getting the idea of the drummer boy being boosted by Peace on Earth before they voiced into that famous duet. In my final footnote here I reach for a more complex image wound round Lutoslawski’s *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. But for the moment you might bear in mind and molecules the image of Stephen White and Step Han Rainbow weaving towards the integrity of a Music without Sound. Is there an eschatology lurking here?

² I recall my searchings in “Middle Kingdom: Middle Man (T’ien-hsia: I jen),” *Searching for Cultural Foundations*, edited by P. McShane, University Press of America, 1980, p.10: “Jaspers, in his *Origins and Goals of History*, places a basic axis of history in the period between 800 and 200 B.C., when man reaches significant differentiation in Greece, Persia, Israel, India and China. In the context of a later discussion of contemporary culture, he raises the question of second Axial Period. Toynbee took issue with Jaspers in his last work, *Mankind and Mother Earth*, p. 178: ‘It would be misleading to set a chronological limit to the Axial Age that excluded those two mighty epigone (Jesus and Muhammad) of Zarathustra and ‘Deutero-Isaiah’. Thus the Axial age expands from a period of about 120 years to one of about seventeen centuries running from c.1060 B.C. down to A.D. 632, which is the date of Muhannad’s death.’ I push on through Voegelin’s reflections, especially on the parallel between Sumerian King Listing and Hegel, to extend axiality to take in both of Jaspers’ periods and reach beyond our sick times. How long is the Axial Period? “What is the subsequent course of the longer cycle of decline generated by the general bias of common sense?” (*Insight*, 257) That depends on you.

³ *La Spirale* was the title of a novel sketched by Flaubert. For more detail see note 78, p. 207 of my *Lack in the Beingstalk* (Axial Publishing, 206). Chapter 4, “The Calculus of Variation,” to

movement.⁴ *Models?* There are those of course, male and female, who aspire to a place on the runway or on the pages of glossies. There are, too, models, as envisaged by Sorokin in his late-life Harvard research project.⁵ There are models in sciences and the humanities all the way up to heuristic models or ideal types like the ideal types of Toynbee.⁶ But here I wish you to think of aspiring models as foundations persons of the third stage of meaning, gripping and being gripped by W_3 and its companions and successors.

Nor am I going to re-express the previous treatments of the character⁷ of such persons, though I may add nudges to further imagings and imaginings. I am simply

which the note gives a much fuller context, especially in regard to the early work of Husserl in mathematics. For a recent view within aesthetics see Henry Michael Gott, *Ascetic Modernism in the Work of T.S. Eliot and Gustave Flaubert*, Routledge, 2016. See especially there chapter 5, "Caught in the Circle of Desire: the Vortex as Ascetic Metaphor," which brings in other sources, Eastern and Western, for this imaging,

⁴ I first mentioned this aspect of Pound in [Cantower 1](#). See there note 24: "I must note here that I am not setting up Pound as some front-runner in the search for the 'tale of the tribe.' I happen to find the Canto notion suggestive, tied in with Lewis' notion of vorticism and Upward's image of 'whirl-swirl' (Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos*, Princeton University Press, 1976, 92-3). See also note 39: "Pound wrote 'if you clap a strong magnet beneath a plateful of iron filings, the energies of the magnet will proceed to organize form . . . the design in the magnetized iron filings expresses a confluence of energy' ("Affirmations, Vorticism," *The New Age*, xvi, 11, Jan 14, 1915, 277).

⁵ See his *Altruistic Love. A Study of American Good Neighbors and Christian Saints*, Beacon Press, 1950 and *The Way and Power of Love*, Templeton Press, 1954.

⁶ "I would like to suggest that Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History* might be regarded as a source-book of ideal types." (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 228) Recall Pieter Geyl's view (*Theories of History*, 319), as presented by Lonergan there in *Method*. "At the same time, so resolute a critic as Pieter Geyl has found the work immensely stimulating and has confessed that such daring and imaginative spirits as Toynbee have an essential function to fulfill." But recall also the strange view expressed in *Allure* (p. 145) of Toynbee as trapped in initial meanings. White is thus trapped, in spite of elements of a science of psychology. Yet, there is a broad consensus that he is a stimulating and imaginative spirit on that level of culture.

⁷ I am recalling the climb of the first section of chapter 14 of *Method in Theology*: to the end of the third sentence, sentencing: "his horizon, his assimilative powers, his knowledge, his values, his character" (*Method*, 356). Add the suggestions of note 12. Perhaps it is of value and in character to quote the beginning of the Aristotelian *Magna Moralia*: "Since our purpose is to speak of matters of character, we must first inquire of what character is a branch. To speak concisely, then, it would seem to be a branch of nothing else than statecraft. For it is not possible to act at all in affairs of state unless one is of a certain kind, to wit, good. Now to be good is to possess

going to note, or rather nudge you to slowly and contemplatively gnote and gnome, the absence in our culture of any serious fermentation towards the emergence of such persons. Indeed, the novel I quoted at the beginning serves that purpose well, whether we consider the author or the characters he invents. So, I will chat here a bit about Stephen White,⁸ his central character, Alan Gregory, and that central character's ex-wife, Meredith, or as Gregory calls her regularly *Me*. Our problem is to identify Me and me: but here, not in a sweep through the cultural problems as Lonergan does, but by a ME-reading, a me-reading, a first mansion contemplative reading, of a couple of passages from Stephen White's novel.

Our problem? These essays are primarily addressed to those interested in Lonergan's effort to shift methodological reflection into a world-dominance of aspiring models. OUR problem is the shrinkage of his aspirations, of his poise on the runway: or rather a commitment to reach for his glimpse of unlivability, his invitation to sniff the sick smell of modernity, the modes and fashions of axiality, of perhaps what Voegelin called *The Ecumenic Age*. But here I invite you, not with the loftiness of Voegelin or Sorokin or Lonergan but with a little twist on what we might call the ordinary, the prevalent, poise of writing and reading popular fiction.⁹

So, let us pause here over Me: Meredith in *Dead Time* talking about her husband Eric:

For the years plus that I have known Eric, I have been trying very hard to understand his relationship with God. He didn't seem to be any more religious than anyone else when we were first introduced, but as

the excellencies. The treatment of character then is, as it seems, a branch and starting point of statecraft. And as a whole it seems to me that the subject ought rightly to be called, not Ethics, but Politics."

⁸ White, among other things a psychologist, is quite trackable on the Web: see especially "frequently asked questions" on his own website about the manner in which Alan benefits from Stephen's profession. Might not the third stage of meaning vortex the benefiting up a level from Stephen to Step Han?

⁹ Recall the reflections on Edna O'Brien in [HOWX](#), with its pointing towards a deeper X-Factor. The present focus differs in that it asks (about)³ the popular ooze of culture that pervades all our molecules, be we journalists or politicians or, alas, even high-level academics.

I got to know him better, and with every piece of bad news either of us got—and yes, we’ve had our share—the ferocity of his faith redoubled.

My fragile faith wanes under the exact same forces. I don’t understand that.

Eric’s faith—I admit the secular molecules in me have trouble with the word—provides him great comfort. It certainly gives him strength. Although I can’t understand it, and at times I’m dubious about it, mostly I’m grateful. Sometimes when I am fighting with my own demons and feeling alone, I envy him the solace he finds from his relationship with God.

I should say ‘gods.’ There are definite distinctive gods in Eric’s universe of faith. The capital-G God is a fearful, wrathful force for him. A heavens-quaking, earth-fracturing power.

But Eric’s relationship with Jesus is different. Eric thinks of Jesus as a friend. If Jesus showed up at our door tomorrow morning, Eric would bring him in for waffles and then ask him to play tennis at the club.

But if God, the capital-G one, pounded on our door, I think Eric would cower beneath the piano and start repenting. He’d confess sins he didn’t even commit. Probably contend that I was a virgin and offer to sacrifice me on some altar.

I didn’t know for certain if Eric addressed his prayers about the propriety of us using a surrogate to solve our conception woes to the capital-G God or to Jesus. Eric kept those kinds of details about his faith to himself. Were I to guess, though, I would guess the surrogate question had earned the blessing of the Big Guy. That God seemed to get the serious stuff.

Jesus was there to provide comfort, support, and the kind of quiet guidance that allowed Eric to sleep after he heard the latest reports from Sudan or Iraq, the kind of solace that gets him through crosstown traffic or a slow elevator ride when he’s running late for an appointment, the kind of patience that allows him to endure a fender-bender without wanting to tear the other guy’s head off.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Dead Time*, 86–7.

I wish us to muse over a second piece of the book, so let me include it immediately. It is a piece on Me, on Meredith, as viewed by her ex-, the psychologist Alan Gregory:

In her job Meredith is responsible for directing a team that produces—conceptualizes, pitches, develops, researches, writes and tapes—the long-form pieces that arc’ between commercials during a prime-time hour. Her stories act as lenses focused on the issues- inane, mundane, and occasionally even profound—of our time. She’s received enough broadcasting awards—including a couple of Peabodys—to fill the insecure cavities in the souls of most people. As well as anyone in her field, and better than ninety-plus percent of her peers, the woman can analyze news, tease out just the right narrative thread from nonlinear factual jumbles, cut through extraneous crap, cajole her recalcitrant talent to present things her way—which is usually the correct way—and end up telling her audience a story.

When I happened to watch a show that included a piece that Meredith had produced, I could invariably guess which story was hers. Her signature clarity, organization, and sense of drama were easy for me to spot. There was usually a price to be paid, however, in viewing Meredith’s work. If she were a screenwriter or a novelist, reviewers would accuse her of failing to develop her characters. But she was a news producer, not a screenwriter, and her occasional failing was not allowing the players in the stories she was telling to show themselves to full effect onscreen. Meredith needed to be the one to define the characters, to be the puppet master pulling the strings. Her chosen narrative thrust always took higher billing than the players.

But put Meredith in the story? Everything changed. Once she was in, it became a different story, and the telling became a different process. She’d stumble out of the gate, her sharp analytic perspective would vaporize, her professional distance disappear, and her narrative sense would be nowhere to be found.¹¹

If you have come this far with me, you must now wonder where I am going with our shared musing. And there are so many ways of my pointing to my elder journey and your possible venture into the question of the gap¹² between perennial cosmic

¹¹ *Dead Time*, 96–97.

¹² This single word invites you to bring our dead time into the agony of the last two chapters of CWL 18, Phenomenology and Logic: “Subject and Horizon” and “Horizon, History,

aspiration and present dead-time performances that Lonergan raises sweepingly so regularly but would have us ingest by “a slow and steady accumulation of little insights.”¹³ The previous essay pointed to the heights, contemplative heights that are to be the heart of the global movement forward to “fulfilling the redemptive and the constructive roles of the Christian church in human society.”¹⁴ This essay, in an odd way, invites me and ME and you to freshly and elementarily sense the battered, vulgar, state of the human society in which that construction is to take place, to sense it in particular in the problem of culture as Lonergan viewed it in *Insight’s* section on “Culture and Reversal.”¹⁵ To put the point in a vulgar pun I misquote his first sentence of that section—“In the turd place there is culture”¹⁶—and pose for us the discomforting too-close question, Is this really true of Lonerganism? So, you, woman or “man can pause and with a smile or a forced grin ask what the drama is all about. His culture is his capacity to ask, to reflect, to reach an answer that at once satisfies his intelligence and speaks to his heart.”¹⁷ Speaks to her heart? “He said to her, ‘that now was the time she should consider His affairs as hers’.”¹⁸ Such is Jesus’s plea, freshened sixty years ago by Lonergan, a plea, not for a police force nor a busybody,¹⁹ not something getting to grips with “the ooze of abnormality” but groping to change the ooze of normality.

Stephen White weaves us forward comfortably in that ooze of normality. The conventional flow is there, of piety and messy living. “But put Meredith in the story?”

Philosophy.” The second last chapter should raise the issue for you, in you, with its second and third sections, “The Existential Gap,” and “Horizon and Dread.”

¹³ *Insight*, 27: the nudge of the first paragraph.

¹⁴ The concluding words of *Method in Theology*, 368.

¹⁵ *Insight*, 261–63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 261. It is hardly necessary to add the correct version: “In the third place there is culture.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Might you not mesh in here a leaning towards a **Yes** to my regular plea: do you view humanity as possibly maturing – in some serious way – or just messing along between good and evil, whatever you think they are?

¹⁹ I refer here to the first and third characteristics of *Cosmopolis*, *Insight*, 263 and 264.

Neither Meredith nor her husband Eric nor her ex- Alan nor Stephen White are in the story. Step Han, the male or female hero of the story of *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History*, leans into the story, seeking the slimly-probably present seeding of a new Han Dynasty.²⁰ Stephen White moves competently on in the ooze of most of present writing, so that his hero Alan, and we his readers, are cozy with the flow of Alan's "prayer for sleep. My prayer was not addressed to any particular god— whichever one was on call that night for inconsequential requests, like mine, was fine."²¹

But the issue all along here has been the ooze of normality of Lonerganism's flow of print and piety. Rather than being "a withdrawal from practicality to save practicality"²² it "puts forth a plausible, ingenious, adaptive, untiring resistance"²³ to Lonergan's leap from the ooze of abnormality that are "academic disciplines"²⁴ to his "third way . . . difficult and laborious."²⁵ Well, no: not really plausible, etc., unless you stay cozily, with hidden dreads, in the ooze, in the turd of "the monster that has stood

²⁰ See *Allure*, 202. The back-cover of *Allure* gives a useful pointing: "The picture on the left is of the author, at 18, walking past the 1916 Irish Revolution's General Post Office in Dublin, in August 1950. He was at an early stage of his dark Joycean struggle beyond the muddles of Catholic Christianity. Sixty six years later, in the centennial year of the Irish Revolution, he invites you, like Joyce's searching Stephen of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published in that Revolution's year, or like the lonely lesbian Stephen of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, to walk in fantasy and creativity towards a fuller global caring view. It is a challenge to you, Step Han, to seed a strange effective Han Dynasty of the well of loneliness. The first brief Han Dynasty in China (206 BCE–220 CE), spanned the Galilean time of Jesus. The new permanent Han Dynasty of global care is to be slowly and patiently weaved round the minding of the Wholly Frail that is the Unknown Real Jesus of the symphony of history."

²¹ *Dead Time*, 342.

²² *Insight*, 266.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Method in Theology*, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

forth in our day,"²⁶ in the sick Dead Time of the axial period. What is the limit of our turdy axiality? Have we reached the limit? Not yet.²⁷

In the limit, culture ceased to be an independent factor that passes a detached yet effective judgment upon capital formation and technology, upon economy and polity.²⁸ To justify its existence, it had to become more and more practical, more and more a factor within the technological, economic, political process, more and more a tool that served palpable useful ends. The actors in the drama of living become stagehands; the setting is magnificent; the lighting superb; the costumes gorgeous; but there is no play.²⁹

Thus emerges the present challenge: can we—literally can we, can Me in me and you, read my two long quotations from White in a way that sniffs out the axial polish and oozy magnificence? I recall now, relevantly, walking round Melbourne's streets one empty Sunday morning reading it in millennia-thick horror and in present thin hope: 'this is not it! This is not humanity's venture either in seed or in blossom.'³⁰ Stephen

²⁶ *Method in Theology*, 40.

²⁷ And reversing the sinking further into ooze? I recall Lonergan's page-long brilliant paragraph beginning "But we are not there yet" (*For a New Political Economy*, CWL 21, 20), worth reading now and relating to our present little illustration of sickness. The final notes here nudge towards a stretching of that illustration to the fuller ugly sick flows that dominate our lives. A fuller context for this stretching and a grip on the thin statistics of breakout, and its conditions, is my *Randomness, Statistics and Emergence*, Gill Macmillan and Notre Dame, 1970, chapter 10, "Emergence and Recurrence-schemes."

²⁸ My own note. It is well worth adding here the context of Patrick D. Brown, "Insight as Palimpsest: The Economic Manuscripts in *Insight*," *The Lonergan Review*, 2010, Volume 2, 132–49. The eventual phyletic addition will reveal the present ontic horrors of malice and stupidity. See note 30 below.

²⁹ *Insight*, 262.

³⁰ There is, of course, nothing special about Melbourne, though the long history of Australia's humanity is quite unique. It was simply a morning of luminous leaping. The challenge to our reach for meaning is that great ugliness is so elusive to our historically-young sensibility that it is a stretch of spirit to tune into it. This has been a regular topic for me [you get references to it simply by Googling thus: "philip mcshane" "great ugliness"]. It is the issue of the present little essay: tuning into the ugliness of the present flow of story-telling. There are other uglinesses, such as that implied in note 28 above: the sick ugliness of the present patterns of the flow of money. See my *Piketty's Plight and the Global Future* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2014).

and Meredith are—should I say caught—in axial ugliness? No, it is not a catchment rather a cosy oozy snoozy settledness.

Might you and I unsettle ourselves here and now? Indeed, if we are already unsettled, so to speak, even to the extent of a Vth or a Xth mansion, might we scramble to a subtler unsettledness, a larger aspiration?

“A conversation between two involves a lot of dead time.”³¹ I have shortened my initial quotation, thus broadening its reach: how much dead time was there in your reading of this HOW? Have you begun to effectively identify dead-beat notes, in White, Back to Black, Shades of Grey, Green shadows of your former self? For **me**, in this ongoing spiral climb of eighty five years, this ending of my final public written conversation is arrived at, leaped at, with relief: I am freer now to edge round the ultimates’ conversations in which God is not an object. What about **you**? What (about)³ you? What about your **what** and its seeding of the future? Is this sniff of the shabby weave “in the story”³² of Eric and Meredith and Alan and Stephen such as to begin to displace you psychically both from the ooze of dead normality in popular communication and, further, from the larger smellier ooze of academic normality in Lonerganesque writings? I had many notions, withheld deliberately now, of pushing this last essay forward round the dead-wood conventional themes of the two quotations from White, not at all like writing variations on themes by Paganini.³³ White is no Paganini of life beyond the dead time.

³¹ *Dead Time*, 132.

³² *Dead Time*, 97.

³³ I think here more of Lutoslawski than of Brahms or Rachmaninov: in particular Stephen Hough’s 2013 performance, with conductor Sakori Oramo, of Lutoslawski’s *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. Chortle, perhaps, over imagining post-axial post-ooze variations on Lonergan’s theme: “Some third way, then, must be found and, even though it is difficult and laborious, that price must be paid if the less successful subject is not to remain a mediocrity or slip into decadence and desuetude.” (*Method in Theology*, 4). Is not the less successful subject me, so remote from attempting Lonergan’s *1833 Overture*? (*Ibid.*, 250, lines 18-33) You gnote and gnome, I hope, that we have come OM to note 1 above? And the search may now begin, with

Nor is Lonerganism even a Bruckner heart-beat of life beyond the dead time.

serious effectiveness, for a community of Aspirers, creeping and leaping from Stephen Houghs to Step Han Houwses, from Stephen White to Step Han Brainbow.