

**INCARNATE QUESTED SPEAKING
A Tribute in Honor of Phil McShane[†]**

Patrick Brown

“Is it not high time that we took the genius seriously?”

McShane¹

“Here we face a giant cultural challenge.”

McShane²

I first met Phil McShane in 1980. I had just finished my junior year at Boston College, and I stayed around for the June Workshop instead of flying back to my home in Seattle for the summer. Somehow I ended up at one of those evening parties which took place after the conference had finished for the day. It was late in the evening, alcohol and conversation were flowing freely, and those still present were definitely feeling no pain. I remember Sebastian Moore was inspired to stand up and give a stirring rendition of the clown’s song at the end of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (the one with the refrain, “For the rain it raineth everyday”).

It was a very moving experience. But then Phil stood up and proceeded to deliver a dramatic reading of the last three pages of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*—from memory! I had just finished a semester-long course on Joyce, so I knew that it was no easy text to memorize, or even to read. And yet here was Phil spinning it out effortlessly, in an almost incantatory and dream-like way. I knew then that I was in the presence of a remarkable man. It was only a first glimmer, of course. I had no earthly idea then how truly remarkable he really was. And the strange thing is, all these years later, that’s probably still true.

Phil McShane was—and is—a truly great man, a remarkable man. Just now, I said “is” a great man. Can I just note, as an aside to the philosophers and theologians among you, that it’s very strange that we use the past tense for someone who has died, when in fact that person continues to exist, and

[†] An earlier and slightly different version of this tribute was delivered to the Sixth Lonergan Latin American Conference on June 10, 2021. I have preserved the “live voice” aspect of the original tribute.

¹ From an email to the “Lonergan on the Edge” conference participants, August 27, 2012 (referring, of course, to Lonergan).

² *Posthumous* 4, “Conversing with Divine Persons,” 8, n. 28, <http://www.philipmcshane.org/posthumous>.

in a heightened state at that. Someday I suppose we'll wake up from the all-encompassing obliviousness of our general bias and invent a grammatical tense appropriate for eternal life. In the meantime, we're stuck with the ridiculous linguistic travesty of describing a man in the state of eternal life in the past tense.

I mention the linguistic realm for another reason. Soon after *Method* was published, Phil seized on Lonergan's notion of "linguistic feedback" and its essential role in advancing self-appropriation, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. For years, he practically flogged the theme of linguistic feedback. Yet no one else ever really took notice. To this day.

Phil was like that. He was a remarkably powerful and original and incisive thinker. He was anything but clichéd and conventional, as we are, for the most part.³ He envisioned so many things beyond the constricted horizon of ordinary or even scholarly common sense—marvels and mysteries that the more prosaic and plodding of us would never have noticed without his gentle but steady prodding. To take just one of many examples, Phil single-handedly recovered the what-to-do question from the clutches of those who read Lonergan and themselves in a relatively formulaic and stilted and conventional way.⁴ (As Lonergan himself remarked, "It is not to be assumed that this invariant structure is as jejune as the triad: experience, understanding, judging."⁵)

Phil kept stressing the far-reaching significance of the fact that, as Lonergan put it, "being intelligent includes the grasp of hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities."⁶ Well, yes it does! And being intelligent about being intelligent requires us to grasp hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities for "the making of being"⁷ and the making of ourselves, personally and collectively, and to notice the structural role of the what-to-do question in human cognitional process and in human destiny. Phil even formulated a transcendental precept for this profoundly important and yet strangely neglected layer of us: Be Adventurous!

³ Recall Lonergan's remark that "the conventional mind is our situation." *Topics*, CWL 10, 182.

⁴ See, e.g., Philip McShane, "'What-To-Do?': The Heart of Lonergan's Ethics."

⁵ Archival document 27410DTE070, page 20. I recall a similar remark by Phil on the levels of consciousness recorded in my personal notes. "They're dimensions of the human subject. The problem is to not think of these levels as levels at all. It's you as a subject maturing into a sophistication that puts you in the real world."

⁶ *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 52.

⁷ *Insight*, CWL 3, 633.

Reading Phil and listening to Phil was itself an adventure, an adventure in the sense of a quest-toned romance of discovery and depth, an adventure of noticing hitherto unnoticed possibilities. I'll give an example. One of the first sentences by Phil I fell in love with goes like this: "If we were adequately listening to one another's incarnate quested speaking, we would be in a state of habitual genuflection."⁸

He spoke, he uttered, many such signposts on the rocky road to a kind of holiness, and on the long and difficult road to remote theory that he traveled so relentlessly his whole life.

And what of *his* incarnate quested speaking and listening? I am fairly sure Phil never underestimated anyone's pain or struggle—or if he did, it would have been very rare. That is a remarkable thing to say, but it really was part of the intensity with which he habitually listened to people. It could be almost unnerving. Pause for a moment and listen to that sentence again. "If we were adequately listening to one another's incarnate quested speaking, we would be in a state of habitual genuflection." Doesn't that sentence speak in some very powerful and luminous way to what it really means to be a Christian? And yet not too many of us are in a state of habitual genuflection.

⁸ Philip McShane, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* (1st ed.), 105, in the second edition (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2021) 90. As everyone who knew Phil knows, this sentence about appreciating other people's incarnate quested speaking was a profound part of Phil's own incarnate quested meaning and valuing. Here are a few, more or less random, memories on that theme. One time in June 1989 we were at a restaurant on a Friday evening near my then-home in Boston. A group of attractive young women sat near the bar, dressed to the nines. Phil leaned over and remarked to me: "Those ladies are not looking for a quick score. They're *gasping* for meaning and gentleness." I cannot convey the emphatic stress he gave the word "gasping," but somehow it seemed to sum up the whole lonely quest of every human journey. Another example from the same year. Phil and I were walking in downtown Boston when a homeless man asked me for a dollar. I politely declined. As we walked on, Phil turned to me and asked why I had not given the man a dollar. I replied that he would probably only spend it on alcohol. Phil looked at me, and then asked, in a gentle voice, "Did it ever occur to you that he might need his beer more than you needed your dollar?" To be honest, that had never occurred to me, possibly because I was a student at the time and living on a part-time salary, but more probably because I just had no idea how not to be conventional in such situations. Or as Phil remarked on another, more recent occasion, "We're no longer discomfited by our own brutalization."

But I suspect Phil really was in that state when he was around other people. There was something about the way he listened to you, something about the way he listened to everyone. He listened to you not just attentively but almost reverently. He listened like your life depended on it—and maybe with some people it actually did. If I could crystallize this aspect of him, I would say that speaking with Phil in any depth left you, in the words of Seamus Heaney, with “an intimation of a far more generous and desirable way of being alive in the world.”⁹

There is so much to say about the man Phil McShane. We could all tell stories for quite a while, I suspect, about his utterly incandescent and fertile mind, his astonishing genuineness as a human being, his prodigious aesthetic development and sensibility, his beautiful and subtle effectiveness as a teacher. These qualities shone through in everything he did and said.

There were so many unique things about Phil. One of them was that he took *Lonergan the scientist* so seriously. Not every Lonergan scholar does; very few, in fact, and none with his range and depth and intensity. Phil was teaching quantum theory and relativity to graduate students by the time he was 27. He was supremely well positioned, early on, to take Lonergan’s scientific discoveries seriously. And so he took very seriously the man who first discovered emergent probability as the constitutive order of our universe, the man who first discovered the deep structure of all economic process, the man who first discovered scientific hermeneutics.

Phil constantly and gently invited the rest of us *to do the same*. He invited by cajoling us into taking seriously time scales that lie far beyond the horizon of common sense: the millions of years that went into human emergence, the 13.7 billion years that have gone into cosmic genesis.¹⁰ He invited by writing a 300-page commentary on a single paragraph in *Insight*.¹¹ Now, that’s quite an invitation!

We can honor Phil best, I think, by accepting the invitation he so frequently and brilliantly issued. Phil’s invitation took many forms. Its basic template appears in the introduction to *Wealth of Self*. “I am inviting you to begin a difficult and delicate task of self-investigation.”¹² Yet no matter the

⁹ Seamus Heaney, “Extending the Alphabet,” *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995) 36.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the diagram on the last page of Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas*, 260.

¹¹ See on his website the series *Field Nocturnes*, an extended commentary on a paragraph found on *Insight*, CWL 3, 489.

¹² *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* (2nd ed.), xi.

particular variations of that constantly-issued invitation, it always included an implicit or explicit invitation to climb. “My books represent my climb; they may help in your climb.”¹³ And climb you did, if you took his invitation seriously. Most of us did so only slowly and falteringly. But there is no shame in that. There is nothing easy about that climbing. It takes perseverance. It takes courage. It involves a climb of decades. Perhaps that is why Phil was fond of quoting W.B. Yeats’ remark, “Why should we honor those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in descending into the abyss of himself.”¹⁴

Here is the same invitation, from 1989, formulated in a slightly more oblique way. It looks different, but I think it is the same invitation, now issued at a higher level. Is not explanatory science a revelation of the cosmic Word, and is not the cosmic Word part of the difficult task of self-investigation to which we are called?

The search for adequate cosmologies has lived for millennia in a naïve descriptive optimism ... History in this past millennium—I recall Butterfield’s point about the scientific revolution—divinely reveals the remote intelligibility of such common and simple things as electrons, water molecules, and trees. Physics learned a deep humility at the beginning of the twentieth century. Chemistry became rigorous in the period between Lavoisier and the discoveries of Meyer and Mendeleev. Biology at present is uncomfortable with the explanatory heuristic of an emergent probability that links genetic realities. Meaning is a realm that is altogether more complex, and its present study might be regarded as paralleling pre-Linnean biology.¹⁵

Like so many of Phil’s invitations, this one invites us first of all to a deep humility concerning our own fundamental nescience in the universe.

¹³ Philip McShane, *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History*, 18.

¹⁴ The line appears in a number of Phil’s works. See, e.g., *Introducing Critical Thinking*, 169; *The Future: Core Precepts in Supramolecular Method and Nanochemistry*, 15. The original source is Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) 6.

¹⁵ Philip McShane, “Psychic Differentiations and Systematic Heuristics,” in *Lonergan’s Hermeneutics: Its Development and Application*, ed. Sean McEventue and Ben Meyer (The Catholic University of America Press, 1989): 209–216, at 214–15. It is easy, too easy, to read this paragraph once, as you just did, and somehow tacitly conclude that one has understood it because one understood how the words were used appropriately in the sentences. See also the first sentence, as well as the first paragraph, of Lonergan’s article, “Mission and the Spirit,” *A Third Collection*, CWL 16, 21.

We are multi-layered mysterious beings living in a very mysterious universe. That is not an easy thing to achieve, honestly—this “reaching a glimpse of one’s nescient self in a friendly universe.”¹⁶ The general bias of common sense cuts against recognizing and fully appreciating such things. And the general bias cuts against recognizing that the general bias cuts against recognizing and fully appreciating such things.

Characteristically, this passage also implicitly invites us to climb slowly and humbly toward the difficult achievement of some grasp of some explanatory science, to slowly and patiently read ourselves and nature in a very different light. To fight the urge to settle down as a ready-made self in a ready-made world of ravening false obviousness, together with the disguised but brutalizing alienation that comes with it. To live instead in HOW-shifts and HOW-language, where HOW is an acronym for “Home of Wonder,” “weaving into the world’s words epiphanic ‘signs and wonders.’”¹⁷ To see a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a sunflower.¹⁸

After all, human consciousness is by its very nature oriented into mystery. That orientation is in some basic and primal way Edenic. Think of the vibrant wonder-worlds of children. Or consider art. Almost the whole function of art is to pull us right out of the everyday obliviousness in which we are so easily and so comfortably ensconced,¹⁹ to return us to that “primal

¹⁶ Philip McShane, “Prologue,” *Process: Introducing Themselves to Young (Christian) Minders* (Halifax: Mt Saint Vincent University Press, 1989) xxiii.

¹⁷ McShane, *Allure*, 15. See also McShane, *Posthumous* 4, “Conversing with Divine Persons,” 8, n. 28 (“Normatively, we accelerate in our improvement of concept, being always strangers to ourselves of last week. This, when roled, tasked and institutionalized (the reference is to the display on *Method* 48 [CWL 14, 47]) in later centuries, will transpose human communication very radically: there is to be a new ethos of HOW-language, rescuing each of our journeys as Homes-Of-Wonder.”)

¹⁸ I have substituted the word “sunflower” for “wild flower” in William Blake’s famous lines from *Auguries of Innocence*. See McShane, *Cantower II*, “Sunflowers Speak to Us of Growing.” <http://www.philipmcschane.org/cantowers>

¹⁹ Lonergan suggests that “just as the pure desire to know heads on to the beatific vision, so too the break from the ready-made world heads on to God.” *Topics*, CWL 10, 224-25. He suggests that the dynamic in which art and its release of potentiality “heads on to God” is “the fundamental meaning important to us in art.” CWL 10, 224. Art de-instrumentalizes human experience, and therefore returns us to “the primal mode of being that is the normal level of human living apart from the differentiations of consciousness.” CWL 10, 221. See also Patrick Brown and Mike

mode of being” that is our native orientation into mystery. Constantly Phil invited us to notice, and notice again, to savor, and savor again, that central and luminous fact about ourselves.

Here is another invitation, from his second-to-last book: “My book centers on a definite doctrine: You are a supermolecule.”²⁰ Now, that may not sound very inviting to you. Yet it really is an invitation, but only if we’re developed enough to hear it. That’s a big “if.” Lonergan frames the issue this way: “the less developed one is, *the less one appreciates the need for development* and the less one is willing to take time out for one’s intellectual and moral education.”²¹ The less one is willing to take time out for supermolecules, you might say. I honestly do not think we can be well oriented in the universe of being, or in the universe of meaning, or in the universe of Phil’s written works, without meditating long and hard on that paradoxical doctrine.

Phil was an utterly brilliant man, but also a deeply gentle man. Yet he could also be brutally honest, if he thought it would promote your development. And so for decades he served as a Socratic gadfly to the Lonergan community—a role for which, it must be admitted, he was not always well liked. I know that Phil was deeply loved and respected by the Lonergan communities in Latin America, in India, and in Korea, and vice versa—and that speaks very well of those communities, I think. In contrast, in the North American Lonergan community, there were those who actively resented him and ostracized him, for reasons either conscious or unconscious. I don’t wish to dwell on that topic here, but neither do I want to let it go entirely unnoted.

In the end, the resentment and ostracizing are not entirely surprising. It is the fate, I think, of any gadfly to incur some resentment. Think of the way Phil constantly drew attention to the scandal of the decades-long neglect by the Lonergan community of page 250 of *Method*, or for that matter of functional collaboration itself. It’s no wonder he attracted some ire. As Lonergan—no stranger to that role himself—once said, “You get all sorts of pique and indignation and emotion and resentment in philosophic debates because philosophic issues are concerned with the horizon of the subject,

Shute, “A Concise Primer on Lonergan’s Theory of Art: Elemental Meaning and the Artist’s Idea,” *Divyadaan* 30/2 (2019): 183–203.

²⁰ McShane, *The Future*, 37.

²¹ *Insight*, CWL 3, 650 (emphasis added).

and the horizon of the subject is connected with his own vital solution to the problem of conscious living.”²²

I suspect that the reaction of pique and ire and resentment by some to Phil’s decades-long attempt to push the Lonergan movement forward in an adequately systematic and scientific manner—to take Lonergan seriously, you might say—did not bother Phil much. What truly bothered him was contemplating the distinct possibility that the Lonergan movement itself would fall under Lonergan’s own description of a decadent school. “Such devaluation, distortion, corruption may occur only in scattered individuals. But it may occur on a more massive scale, and then the words are repeated but the meaning is gone.”²³ What truly bothered him was contemplating the distinct possibility that Lonergan would, in effect, be betrayed by well-meaning disciples who failed to notice that fact. What truly bothered him was that the scientific ideals of Lonergan can be invoked in re-assuring words and articles, even as those highly demanding ideals “can vanish to be replaced by the conventions of a clique.”²⁴

Phil could be pretty forceful when criticizing the conventions of what he considered a decadent clique. And the more that criticism was greeted with the silent treatment, the more he reiterated it. Still, I think the problem was more basic than that. Phil always had a healthy respect for the complexity and difficulty of scientific or meta-scientific discovery and expression. He harbored a corresponding suspicion regarding easy summary

²² *Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18, 291.

²³ *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 78. I think it important to note that these same concerns were shared by Lonergan himself as he began to write the early drafts to the introduction to *Method*. That is to say, they are not somehow the concerns of a wild-eyed character named McShane. “Apprehension of method may go no further than a set of fragmentary slogans; its acceptance may have no better basis than the other-directedness of conventional minds; and then its use will be unresourceful, inflexible, obtuse. The rules of the game will be known and obeyed but, unfortunately, they will not be understood; they will safeguard the prestige and privileges of an in-group, but prevent rather than promote the advance of science.” Archives file 47500DTE060, page 4.

²⁴ *Method in Theology*, CWL 14, 78. See also CWL 23, 375 (“But the subject does not advert to this divergence, and in fact the divergence itself, in a way, lies beyond his horizon. ... The result is a kind of systematic simplification, a watering down and a distortion ... this is how ... an entire school can become decadent ... Then is the time for the axe to be laid to the root, yet there are very few who can see a need for the axe.”)

or popularization that was not self-reflective enough to notice that it was a mode of *haute vulgarisation*.²⁵ That respect and that suspicion were not always shared by his colleagues.

And then there's that other great, lingering, and genuinely painful problem, the problem with Phil's readership—the problem with all of us. It is intimated in the old Latin proverb, *pro captu lectoris libelli habent sua fata*. "Books have their fates according to the reader's capacity." The fate of Phil's books—as much as the fate of Lonergan's books—awaits the emergence of a class of readers whose capacities are truly adequate to those profound and brilliant books. It may be a long wait.

Still, Phil believed that in the long-run Lonergan's world-historical brilliance would effectively seed human progress. I think that gave him hope and comfort (although his sense of exactly how long "the long-run" could be was rather disconcerting). I can personally attest that in his later years, his elderhood, Phil brilliantly and rather beautifully embodied the stance expressed by the poet Stanley Kunitz in his own elderhood.

I can scarcely wait til tomorrow
when a new life begins for me,
as it does each day,
as it does each day.²⁶

The American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti once wrote a poem-fragment. It goes like this:

Thus did I, pondering our
myriad inscrutable destinies
hidden in time²⁷

²⁵ One of his more gentle elaborations on this theme can be found in his first book. A "summary can give the impression of capturing the essence of a position. But a summary expresses the essence only in so far as the summarizer has the essence of the position in his mind. In this respect one may note that the book *Insight* is a summary expression of a philosophic position. As such it provides a phantasm for the reader which requires elaborate supplementation if the reader is to reach the mind of the author." McShane, *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence* (1st ed.), viii.

²⁶ "The Round," in Stanley Kunitz, *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 128.

²⁷ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in Christopher Felver and Gary Snyder, *The Poet Exposed* (Toronto: St. James Press, 1986) 128. The ellipse marks are part of the poem.

Those lines grow in meaning and resonance the older I get. Part of my own inscrutable destiny was to run into two extraordinary geniuses whose lives happened to overlap with my own. One was Bernard Lonergan. The other was Phil McShane. So many different conditions had to be fulfilled in just the right way, at just the right time, in order for that to happen, in order for my life to have been that lucky. I am immensely grateful for the luck, the providence, the grace, of meeting Phil. I know that you, also, sense that kind of incredible luck in your own lives.

Phil became a friend and mentor to me, as he did to so many people. He was incredibly generous with his time and talent throughout the many years I knew him. In fact, I would say that to know Phil McShane was itself a kind of destiny, as knowing Lonergan's work was a kind of destiny. Once you really met them, in print or in person, you were forever changed by both, if you took them seriously—and not in a small way.

I conclude with a poem that was near and dear to Phil's heart, a haiku with a redemptive resonance:

I thought I saw a fallen leaf
returning to its branch
only to discover
it was a butterfly

