

Review of Philip McShane, *Interpretation from A to Z* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2020), 208 pages.

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A subtitle for this book could have read "A Revolution Betrayed." The author begins by criticizing conventional ways of reading and interpreting the works of Bernard Lonergan, ways that remain at the level of common-sense meanings. However, Lonergan's purpose in Chapter 17, Section 3 of *Insight* and in Chapter 7 of *Method in Theology* was to start a revolution in ways of reading and interpreting. Why have his followers failed to make the radical changes he proposed? No doubt academic inertia has played a role. The changes are difficult to make, remote from inherited pre-scientific practices, and perhaps too futuristic for those settled into familiar scholarly routines.

Thus, another purpose of this book is to reach out to those who aspire to interpreting scientifically. They may be few and are probably young scholars: "few" because they are disenchanted with what many others find quite satisfying (e.g., well-written papers read at conferences or novel arguments presented in published articles); and "young" because they are more likely to be disenchanted with academic practices that seem ineffective in improving anyone's life. They know the "path to fame," or at least to tenure, requires publishing frequently, but in the humanities and elsewhere it is unclear how the flood of books, papers, and arguments settles any questions and makes any progress in solving problems.

So what are any of us who are disenchanted to do? First, an admission of our own inadequacies, that we are just beginners in developing a science of interpretation, is a counterweight to any pretensions to already possess such a science. Second, for those of us acquainted with Lonergan's writings on the canons of hermeneutics and on functional specialization (hereafter FS), a serious reading of them offers hope that we can overcome some of our inadequacies. But here McShane adjusts his sights to what is suitable for beginners. Rather than recommend we tackle the entirety of FS, he suggests a "small stab" at doing "a science of cyclic interpretation" (xiii).

Specifically, he proposes we experiment with doing just the last three steps in the fourth functional specialty of dialectic. That is, after we each assemble the available interpretations of a selected issue, ideally ordering them into some kind of developmental sequence, we (1) proceed to evaluate what we each think is the most developed interpretation in terms of Lonergan's universal viewpoint; (2) identify what we each think are promising ideas that might make for further advances in understanding the issue or in making new policies that promote progress; and (3) circulate our individual results from the first two steps and invite criticisms from those doing the same exercise. Our estimates of progress in understanding, both current and future, are, thus, being recycled within the group of experimenters. What might come of doing these three steps? Have you heard of peer review in other disciplines and of its beneficial results?

Such experimenting is already underway in the "*Duffy Exercises*" (106, 129, and 165–66) that begin appearing online in this volume of *Journal of Macrodynamic Analysis*. Most readers may not have come across these exercises, but they are likely familiar with Thomas Kuhn's narrowing of his use of "paradigm" to mean the series of increasingly difficult exercises students in physics tackle in their years of graduate studies.

Are there similar exercises in any of the humanities? In a series of footnotes, McShane suggests questions and puzzles that could serve as materials for such exercises. What he and those currently composing such exercises expect is that, just as students of physics routinely develop by solving more difficult problems, so those in the humanities can gradually develop by moving from simpler issues to more complex ones. Ideally, given sufficient numbers of experimenters, the results of their exercises will be "too effective to be ignored." That is, in place of interminable debates, they will settle some issues and so demonstrate that interpretations in the humanities can be more than a parade of the latest fashions.

McShane is asking readers to take a stand on broad questions about historical progress and cultural advance. Much ink has been spilt on these questions, but his alternative approach mimics Lonergan's pragmatic appeal to focusing on your own performance in coming to know anything. That is, the preliminary step in answering the broad questions is self-attention to your own developing as you raise and answer questions. As he succinctly puts it: "My topic is you" (176). Again, doing the exercises in collaboration with others provides opportunities to personally experience some degree of development and thus generates evidence that progress in understanding and solving problems does occur.

What does this practical strategy assume? Surely it helps to be already dissatisfied with the status of the humanities as fields of serious inquiry. But does this strategy have a more positive aim? I think it does. What McShane calls the “problem of the chasm” (a phrase recurring 17 times in footnotes, beginning on page 3, n. 8.) is the gap that occurs between the common-sense interpretations of most scholars and the explanatory understanding more commonly found in the sciences. For some this gap is not a problem. They offer various rationales for confining the humanities to one side of the chasm and leaving the sciences on the other side. However, an unasked question is, “If the sciences ‘get at’ reality, what might the humanities be talking about?”

A more basic form of this chasm is personal, namely, neglect of what each of us is reaching for in wondering about all manner of things. To counter this self-neglect McShane prompts you to ask: “What am I as I ‘What’?” He hopes you pause long enough to discover that your craving for understanding is normative in your living. When Aristotle wrote of “what was finest in us,” he was referring to our desire to make sense of all manner of things, even to ask what is going on in history and in the universe. Here a further purpose of the book emerges. McShane is addressing his readers directly and inviting them to read and interpret both themselves and history. This direct address is a departure from the academic style his book criticizes. In his words, he hopes doing so “hits the stale on the head” (71). But he knows there are many obstacles in his way. He has no doubt that Maslow was correct in claiming that only about one percent of adults grow.

Is it possible to raise that percentage? The author writes of a “new heading for humanity ... reading itself from childhood on as a fullness of what” (x). In numerous works he has cryptically stated, “What are we.” In deliberately omitting the question mark he has been encouraging readers to discover what is finest in themselves. He has also been suggesting an answer to the question about what is going on in history. To read the latter as a tension between our neglected potential to wonder about most anything and a remote goal of complete understanding is a strange perspective on our story. To entertain this perspective and then to re-enact some portion of the historical journey toward the elusive goal is to reach past any inherited common sense and to reach for the most up-to-date explanatory interpretation of a selected issue.

Studying the history of some science will detect the dependence of modern inquiry on methods. Today’s reaching for understanding must be methodical; hence, McShane emphasizes FS. The alternative is to assume

the “democracy of minding” with its insistence that anything worth understanding should be translatable in terms anyone can understand. Now ask yourself whether articles in chemistry journals make this assumption. In contrast, do reasonably well-educated readers of journals in the humanities operate with this assumption?

To cross the personal chasm requires years of climbing. The prospect may be disheartening both to beginners and to senior scholars. Return, then, to my opening remark about a possible subtitle for this book: Do I even suspect there is a need for a revolution in scholarly interpreting? Are so many conference gatherings and journal articles behind the times?

If these questions resonate with you, what are you to do? Again, it helps if you are already aware of the limits of common-sense answers to questions. The appeal of the book is to those who have detected that many scholars in the humanities are unacquainted with the reach for explanatory understanding. They do not even recognize there is a chasm. In that case, this book is an invitation to personal growth that many have yet to envision. McShane points the way to that further growth. “I am asking about the existential hope and energy of you as a minder of history. The brutal fact is that, without venturing into serious explanation in some years of your living, you are simply not in the ballpark” (70 n. 39) of scientific interpretation. Elsewhere he adds that without that venturing, you are not operating “at the level of the times.”

How seriously should anyone take these judgments about the current state of many academic disciplines? Live long enough within the walls of academia and you may grow disenchanted. In my case the warning signs came early in my study of Nietzsche. While in graduate school I was taught he was a pragmatist. A few years later at a nearby university, the graduate faculty argued over whether he was a neo-Kantian or a predecessor of existentialism. Then Nehamas’ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* became fashionable, and a new flow of interpretations followed. My impression was that philosophy was more like the fashion industry than serious inquiry. A popular audience periodically demanded novelties, and philosophers supplied them. Has your experience in academia paralleled mine? If so, might McShane’s fantasy about a future science of interpretation be attractive?