

A Failed Attempt to Finish a Thought Left in Mid-Air by Christopher Hitchens

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Abstract

This paper is a short reflection on the nature of hermeneutics and the strange joy and burden of writing. It focuses on a particular form of hesitancy, telling, and re-telling found in a short video clip featuring Christopher Hitchens.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, writing, Christopher Hitchens

Banish all dismay
Extinguish every sorrow
If I'm lost or I'm forgiven
The birds will still be singing.
from Elvis Costello (1993), "The Birds Will Still be Singing"

It is an odd thing when something you read or hear actually *haunts* you and bids remembering, repeated thought and writing, especially when that thing is precisely about being haunted, in a certain way, about hesitating and staying one's actions. It is odd to have an idea, an image, an off-hand comment or a hunch stay with you despite its refusal to cede its secrets.

This is part of the practice of writing. Learning to let stay. It is an urgent patience, a weird joy.

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The late Christopher Hitchens is well known enough for me to not pause for long over his work except to say that his adamant critiques of religion (Hitchens, 2007) and other forms of totalitarianism were complemented by the work of Richard Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens received, quite near his death, *The Richard Dawkins Award* at the 2011 *Texas Free Thought Convention*, one of Hitchens' final public appearances. From that appearance:

Christopher Hitchens: Some of you know, I suppose you all know now, that the words of one of my favorite poets Ernest Dowson are quite often with me. Dowson stole them actually from the Roman poet Horace: *Non sum qualis eram*, "I am not as I was."

.
In the meantime, we have the same job we've always had. There are no final solutions. There is no absolute truth. There is no supreme leader. There is no totalitarian solution that says "If you would just give up your freedom of inquiry, if you would simply abandon your critical faculties, a world of idiotic bliss can be yours." You will certainly lose the faculties, and you may not know as a result, that idiotic bliss is even more idiotic than it looks. But we have to begin by repudiating *all* such claims. Grand Rabbis, Chief Aya-tollahs, infallible Popes, the peddlers of surrogate and mutant quasi-political religion and worship-- the dear leader, the great leader, we have no need of any of this. And looking at them, and their record, and the pathos of their supporters, I realize that it is they who are the grand imposters, and my own imposture this evening was mild by comparison. (GodlessUK, 2013)

The reason I mention the connection to Richard Dawkins in particular is because of what I find to be a still-amazing YouTube video clip of Hitchens and Douglas James Wilson (ObjectiveBob, 2010). Reverend Wilson is the pastor at Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, and has had many intense and easily accessible public debates and talking-head news encounters with Hitchens. This clip is the final moments of a 2009 documentary *Collision: Christopher Hitchens, vs. Douglas Wilson* (Documentaryondemand, 2013).

Wilson and Hitchens appear to be in the back seat of a car and Hitchens mentions how those (like himself) arguing against the Divine design of things still take seriously the hairsbreadth of (what he understands to be) happenstance of "the Goldilocks effect," of the Earth being *just right* in its relation to the Sun and its sustenance: "you have to spend time thinking about it, working on it. It's not a trivial [thing]" (ObjectiveBob, 2010).

Hitchens refers to having had a particular conversation with Richard Dawkins. Then this:

Christopher Hitchens: . . . and then at one point. I think this is not on camera, I said, if I could convert every one in the world -- not convert, if I could convince -- to be a non-believer, and I'd really done brilliantly, and there's only one left. One more and then it would be done. There'd be no more religion in the world. No more deism, theism. [Pause]. I wouldn't do it. [Pause]. And Dawkins said, "What do you *mean* you wouldn't do it?" I said, "I don't quite know why I wouldn't do it." And it's not just because there'd be nothing left to argue and no one left to argue with. Not just *that*. Though it *would* be that. Somehow, if I could drive it out of the world, I wouldn't. And the incredulity with

which he [Dawkins] looked at me stays with me still. I've got to say. (ObjectiveBob, 2010)

As with Dawkins' look of incredulity, this clip now stays with me.

Thoughts first about the aesthetic "punch" that we often feel when we read or hear something:

The word for perception or sensation in Greek was *aesthesis*, which means at root a breathing in or taking in of the world, the gasp, "aha," the "uh" of the breath in wonder, shock, amazement, and aesthetic response. (Hillman, 2006, p. 36)

Tersely put, this is the reason for all those drudgery pages in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989, pp. 42-100) and his attempts to rescue this phenomenon of aesthetic address (p. 299) from its tragic subjectivization and marginalization in our understanding of the experience of truth. This video hits me still, and when I quickly re-created Hitchens' words for my son over the holidays just passed, all he said was "Yep."

Me too. I wouldn't do it. And "it would not deserve the interest [I] take in it if it did not have something to teach [me] that [I] could not know by [my]sel[f]" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxv).

But at first (and still), I just *suspected* this might be so, and Hitchens did, too, in a way. He himself remembered and retold this story and told it, as you can see in the video, with the sly grin of suspecting there's something to it - - a kind of Coyote grin, a bit self-satisfied, a bit expectant, a bit joyous. Were it just a subjective incident with no loft or pitch to it beyond "moist gastric intimacy" (Sartre, 1970, p. 4), re-telling it seems very odd - - sheer self-indulgence and entertainment. On the face of it at least, this is "not just *that*."

Why do we re-tell? Trying, perhaps, to work it out or, better, to see if something works out if you work it a bit: "Something awakens our interest" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 50). "Something is going on, (*im Spiele ist*), something is happening (*sich abspielt*)" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 104). A clue, then, to Gadamer's (1989, pp. 101-134) deep interest in (what is at) play (*Spiel*) (and, I guess, in my interest in that Hitchens video).

Something is going on.

I suspect.

So then the risk you run as a writer: *maybe not*, but only staying put will prove the case for good or ill. Then there is that sort-of hoarder/gatherer/rummager thing that writers do --me, with this clip, saving it, transcribing it, wanting to remember it, telling people about it. There is something here that I need to keep with me, something of the way this idea hangs in the air, somehow, and then, too, of what this hesitation means. Lord knows I've tried: Compassion? Sympathy? Extinction? Like saving a rare bird? Knowing that if no one now *believes* these religious texts they quote, if no one adores these images and ideas, then something is perhaps irretrievably lost? Loss of "the other" as a loss of oneself? Levinas and the horror of facing the last face? Pity? That it

would say something too much, too unbearable of me should I proceed? What about the second-last believer?

Bluntly put, yuck to all this.

And hence the irony, that many drafts of writing have been deleted and these deletions seem to have simply increased the glowing attraction of this clip. “[It] compels over and over, and the better one knows it, the *more* compelling it is. This is not a matter of mastering an area of study” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 115).

This is why, as a writer, I have repeatedly found that it is not just a matter of paying patient attention to the world --to little happenings-by like this clip -- but doing so *as if* I will be answerable *in writing* to such things as arrive in (and, I must say, in part *because of*) such patient attending. *That* prospect --of being answerable in writing --intensifies attention in a most delicious way.

And then comes the odd hermeneutic fidelity of trying to not betray this hovering linger of words and images and appeal and grins, but trying to keep it safe, trying to let it stand in itself, in its own repose. And then that impossible task, of trying to write so that *the linger itself* will be a bit legible in what I then write. The task of hermeneutic writing is to not fall for the falsehood that this lingering is an error that writing might fix. It is, rather, a truth that unfixes writing, makes it loft and swerve and exaggerate unpinned. This, of course, is why hermeneutic research is always prone to the writer's indulgences. The aim of writing is not giving myself free rein (Latin *indulgere*) but giving *this* free rein by finding what of *this* can be eked out in words: “I wouldn't do it.”

“What do you mean you wouldn't do it?” *I don't know what I mean*. Maybe that just attests to the deeply buried hermeneutic assertion, that its work is not about what people or texts or things or signs *mean*, but about what might happen if they were true. “It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to “understand” the text . . . as another's opinion” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 294).

“A text is not understood as a mere expression of life but is taken seriously in its claim to truth” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 297).

In remembering, repeating, and caring for this chance little clip, it serves as a sort of sentinel waiting for an arrival that would bespeak its good sense. It is as if this tale itself provides a way to remain alert to the day-to-day events that come and go, *as if it is waiting for its own reprieve*, waiting to be called for, waiting to be recognized by some kin of the world-- the off-hand event or bit of reading or news story or gesture of a child in a Grade One class, that will summon it, finally, to be what it is. I'm waiting for it to lift off my shoulders in a flight of its own, this sorrow.

Told and retold in almost ritual repetitions, worrying over bones or the great and ancient monastic murmuring of texts out loud and under the breath, seeking the truth of what it repeats, seeks its redemption in words. Monkish practices of scholarship.

Telling and re-telling are attempts to let it find its freedom from my own obsessive remembering of it within the confines of a life whose imposture is both too great and too small by itself to think this through.

Writing this aims to free me from it and to free it from me.

“The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom” (Smith, 1999, p. 29).

To face these fleeting things and try to entail them with the right attention, the right affection, with a devotion that is not about deepening the attachments of believing (the first steps towards totalitarian solutions [see Jardine, 2015]) but the wonder that just might turn attachment into love.

The staying of Hitchens’ words in the face the last person to be convinced is the same stay as the pleasure over not quite knowing why.

However, I don’t quite know why.

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