

Guest Editorial:

“The more intense the practice, the more intense the demons”: A Few Hermeneutic Caveats

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The main title of this paper has served me as a warning for those interested in hermeneutic work, myself, of course, included. It is from Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887) in his text “*The words of my perfect teacher*” (1998, p. 189) and it summons something of the intimate dangers of carefully studying and becoming familiar with the slipstreams of our lives, both those that live in us, and that we, wittingly or otherwise, live within.

There are reasons for these dangers. Hermeneutic begins by “giv[ing] up a special idea of foundation in principle” (Gadamer, 1984, p. 323), that is, giving up the standard Western-philosophical escape mechanism that allows our studying to have, or at least hope for, solid, final, fixed grounding and therefore to gain confidence and stability by referencing some external, permanent, verity, or verities. It leaves us in an orbit of *unheimlichkeit* (Heidegger, 1976/1962, p. 233) an “un-homelike-ness” in which we must give up such hopes.

This, by itself, is vertiginous enough, because it means that hermeneutic study is inevitably haunted by the ghosts of doubt, affliction, exhaustion, fear, and failing. One must become accustomed to sensing that one’s efforts are not enough, that one just might be nothing more than an imposter in this work, work whose imposture is bound to be found out by someone who will trumpet foundational assurances about the topic I may have found so hermeneutically fleeting.

Two things, here. First, get used to it. Second, you have myriad companions in this work, other homeless wanderers. They can’t remedy this situation, but they can commiserate and console and clarify this common lot. They can help you study this mess you’re in and not just suffer it. Seek them out. These can be fellow students, scholars present or long-dead. Hold your suffering in

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common. Compassion.

Even the crack of wood split for winter or the next pull of air, well attended, can help. “Everything is teaching you. Isn’t this so?” (Chah, 2004, p. 5).

But there is another layer here which, in part, bespeaks the proximity of hermeneutics to a phenomenological origin, but which also sharply cuts its cleave both to it and from it (see <http://www.dabhand.org/WordStudies/Cleave.htm> for more details on this lovely dual-inverse meaning of cleaving). Hermeneutic meditations are a bit like this:

Understand “meditation” as it is explained in Dharmamitra’s *Clear Words Commentary (Prasphuta-pada)*: “Meditating” is making the mind take on the state or condition of the object of meditation.” (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 111)

This bespeaks a whiff of an old Aristotelian notion of *mensuratio ad rem*, that is, that our study must “remain something adapted to the object” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 261) and not, instead, something that remains adapted to our methodology, or to the research granting agencies ideas of how to write up a legitimate proposal, or “to the wishes, prejudices, or promptings of the powerful” (p. 261), or to my own hidden or overt pathologies and desires. In this studied and practiced movement to take on the state or condition of the object, it can happen that the object starts to yield up depths and characteristics heretofore unnoticed or occluded. So, the first blush is that the topic we are exploring starts, shall we say, to “break forth” (p. 458) with angular, often suppressed, often pointed bloodlines of implication, contestation, and meaning. Such yielding up means that the topic I am investigating starts running down variegated paths whose turns up ahead make me lose sight of what to do, where to go.

“We must entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 378). But don’t be fooled, here. We must entrust ourselves even when and even though what we are investigating might unleash demons in us that need to be faced in order for us to proceed. When Gadamer speaks of *Bildung* (1960/1989, pp. 9-18), of cultivation and become hale and robust in a complex civil society, of becoming someone through the study one engages in, he’s not simply talking about going to art galleries and other “cultivated,” elitist pleasantries. He is talking about facing the mess of one’s life in our interactions with the world, letting the world in, and letting out our familial, inherited, secret demons to see whether they can live in the light of day:

If you are frightened, wondering whether there is a demon in a strange cave at night, your fear is not dispelled until you light a lamp and carefully investigate whether it is there. (Tsong-kha-pa, 2002, p. 334)

As the object breaks forth, so, too, do I get heretofore secrets secreted, confidences betrayed. I find that my life has been fashioned and inhabited “beyond my wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. xviii).

It is quite disturbing to find out that I may have been living a life that is far more unintentionally duplicitous than I hoped or imagined. I think back, over 30 years of work, to how many times

those, myself included, who feel Hermes rushing nearby and find that that rush unleashes hidden afflictions (e.g., Jardine, 2016). The yielding up of the topic has a tendency to cascade back on my own meditations, beckoning the arousing of my own lived experience and my own deep, perhaps unexamined, complicities in and to these depths. Hermeneutics thus dually cleaves to phenomenology: this is about my own lived experience as a writer, as a scholar and teacher and student, and the complicities and stubborn blind spots of the life I've come to live. But, in such cleavage, I realize that my own lived experience might reveal another level of blockage for which phenomenological descriptions of immediate experience falls bereft: false consciousness.

In speaking with a student recently about his work, his responses to my queries and his emergent accusations set off in me a roiling resistance and measured and unmeasured response. My immediate, lived-experience became an *outcome* of feeling threatened and a withdrawal into self-protection (and then, unfortunately [but luckily briefly] lashing responses from within this coiled mess). We can follow Freud, here, or Jung, or Tsong-kha-pa, or both Paul Ricoeur and Gadamer (1984) regarding the hermeneutics of suspicion, in witnessing that lived experience is often a gloss for deeply hidden afflictions whose spells need “break[ing] open” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 362). “Neither the knower nor the known is ‘present-at-hand’” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 261) just lying there in the open fully clear and exposed and ready to tell, but is, rather, ensnared in the world, duplicitous and hidden, not just present, entangled, not just self-existent. Supposed and however-deeply-felt phenomenological immediacy is revealed as profoundly mediated, profoundly dependently co-arising, profoundly in need, therefore, not of surface description but diagnosis, not just “seeing” but “seeing through.”

“Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 356). “Breaking the spell” can sound so trite, but as often happens in those children’s stories of spells cast and broken, the next gesture can be traumatic: Oh dear, what have I done? What have I been doing, saying, thinking? I didn’t mean it! Honest! Thus, the poverty of the *mens auctoris* (Gadamer, 2007, p. 57).

There is no method here to help those new to such work to avoid this conundrum. “From it no one can be exempt” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 362), and the only recourse is practice, and that practice must always be done by me, by you, for only there does the locale of hermeneutics really emerge. When Gadamer states that, in this work, “we become . . . closer to the real givenness, and we are more aware of the reciprocity between our conceptual efforts and the concrete in life experience,” this reciprocity is not a general or universal procedure, but is what is cleverly and tortuously translated in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962, p. 68, H42) as involving “*in each case mineness [Jemeinigkeit]*.” No one can become practiced in my stead.

So, be careful, and realize that there are good reasons for many lineages of study to say that you must find a good teacher, a practiced teacher. There is a good reason for thinking of the practice of writing as part of the practice of research itself. Play can outplay the players. You can be outrun, overrun, and such “experience[s] . . . [are] not something anyone can be spared” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 356). Gadamer does say that “understanding . . . means that one recognizes that the other person could be right in what he or she says or actually wants to say” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 117). However, part of the deceptively alluring face of hermeneutic work can

be the false hope that it just might be my turn to be the one who could be right. Maybe I can finally tell my story and be heard uninterrupted.

Sorry to disappoint, but that is not how this work works. However, it may be why some hermeneutic ventures (including some of my own) can end with emotional fraught failure, having just aroused and incited fears of one's demons without breaking them open enough to catch the light.

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