

Thoughts on the Return of Yesterday's War

David W Jardine

Abstract

Recent American events have tended to energize me and remind me of a wider swath about our circumstances. We find ourselves fighting this issue on methodological, epistemological, and ontological grounds, but it is also a matter of power and market driven distortions, of issues of gender and how marginalization works to blame precisely those it then victimizes, and on and on. In this paper, I take up some of these ideas.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, hermeneutic research, qualitative research, interpretive research, neo-conservatism, research funding, dominant cultures

Who wants yesterday's papers?

Nobody in the world.

Mick Jagger and Keith Richards (1966) from *Yesterday's Papers*

I

One characteristic of a dominant culture is that, because of its dominance, it no longer needs to give an account of itself or be concerned with its warrantability. It becomes the silently taken-for-granted "way things are" that, *in relation to which*, warrant is decided and determined. Research, publication, funding schemes, even the categories of the forms one fills out, are unquestioningly based on the presumptions and requirements of natural scientific research. It is

Corresponding Author:

David W Jardine

Email: jardine@ucalgary.ca

not simply that funding is difficult to secure for interpretive work. It is that the very means of such securing are already, at the outset, cast against its case.

More buried than this, however, and far more pernicious, is another level of dominance: the presumptions and procedures of quantitative research have come to define anything that does not fall in line with those lines of dominance. Under the shadow of quantitative research, qualitative research is said to be about subjectivity, about telling your story, about making things up, about being unaccountably mushy and vague and undisciplined, about being irrelevant and self-involved, overly poetic, emotional, uninformed, having no proof (Moules, Venturato, Laing, & Field, 2017, p. 3), no generalizability, no reliability. It has little hope of publication. Not of practical use. Not of interest to readers (Moules et al., 2017, p. 1). It is not especially fundable because it does not cleave to the dominant, recognized, and condoned fundamentals.

Interpretive research is, then and of course, treated as an object of weird suspicions, like a sort of cultish faith object, something lurking furtively in some liminal space outside the confines of the surveillances we've come to presume. It is out in the fields (Latin *paganus*), trod the way of heathens, uncivilized, witches work with familiar cats.

So, quantitative research not only "dominates the scene" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 59) but, not coincidentally, has the character of "seiz[ing] upon and dominat[ing] things [with a] will-to-control" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 227), thus casting its own shadow over that which slips out of its purview. The dominating character of quantitative research thus provides an equally dominant caricature of any alternative to it.

Sad to say, over many long years, I've seen purportedly "interpretive" work that has fallen hook, line, and sinker for this degrading, bullying caricature, and seen good hearted scholars get caught in the exhausting, unbecoming, and humiliating mugs-game of attempting to refine and upgrade the contours of this caricature, only to then get bowled over, over and over again, by stinging questions posed often out of sheer, I dare say *deliberate*, ignorance. More than once over thirty plus years, I have encountered people in positions of power (for example, external examiners on Ph.D. examinations), literally say, "Well, I've never heard of hermeneutics!" and who then take that statement as a fully adequate account of why no more needs to be said. Students and scholars alike are then asked to give, over and over and over again, a detailed descriptions of a long and publically available history of interpretive work stretching back, in places, to Aristotle, even to Heraclitus, and up through the humanist tradition first wrought at the advent of modern science in 17th century Europe, into late-19th century European contestations and detailed quarrels and concerns over the nature and limits of the human sciences, up through phenomenology, hermeneutics, into long and complex streams of refinement and differentiation over the course of the 20th and 21st century. And all this is the family tree, of course, to contemporary questioning of the value of "the humanities" in a world which is dominated by market-driven concerns for profitability, and which scoffs as any turbid and turgid and time-wasting suggestions of the cultivation of character, thoughtfulness, and poise.

And those demanding this account, over and over again, have no qualms in *not remembering any of this* the next time questions are raised regarding the legitimacy of interpretive work.

Such is the character of dominance.

Only those marginalized need to remember what has happened. Those who are part of the dominant culture can always plead innocence without consequence. Those marginalized must remember their own bloodlines as well as those of the forces of marginalization. The dominant need remember neither.

Dominance is somnambulant and forgetful by nature, but it sleepwalks and stalks.

How's that for "poetic?" It surely bodes that we are dealing with far more here than matters of research methods. It is no coincidence that First Nations are speaking up in this fray, that ecological beckonings to heed what lies beyond our will to dominate are becoming increasingly urgent, that those excluded want "in" on what it means to be us.

I could go on. We can't pretend any longer that kin are arising here, around what only seems like yesterday's war.

II

Those who have become marginalia to the dominant text have always murmured and have been repeatedly turned into a dirty little secret that might go away if we ignore it again. There is a war. It is nothing new. And the quiet urgency of fighting it remains steady and true. Make no mistake. This goes well beyond issues of "research methods."

What is at stake in the marginalization of interpretive research is whether scholars have the freedom, and the intellectual and spiritual responsibility, to explore the lives, often "the pain" (Sanders, 2016), of teachers, of students, of nurses and patients, and parents, and so on. These varied and varying explorations come via the tough, sometimes vague and nebulous, sometimes contradictory, doorstep stories that are told, voices caught in the confines, for example, of school hallways, stuck, equally, in the confines of the unvoiced and often unvoiceable ways in which schools have been shaped and thus shape teachers and students alike. Likewise, parents who, in a moment of profound breathlessness, entrust their only child into the maw of medicalization. Or who know in advance that they will outlive them. Or who tiptoe their child behind the schoolyard gate and then have an unrecognizable child read back to them by the regnant regimes of schooling that often brook no quarter of response.

The job of interpretive research is to go out into the wild "with [a] readiness to be 'all ears'" (Gadamer, 2007a, p. 189) and to gather what we can of the suffering of our living, the language that is used, the images that arise and fall, how and when the joy outbursts, the secrets, the hushed-ness of ordinary life lived. Interpretive work is then charged with trying to give those stories a voice, to "[make] the text[s]...speak" (Gadamer, 2007b, p. 189) by linking them up to the lifelines of the world, to the images and ideas and ancestries that we have variously inherited, so that their deep resonances can be made conscious. This is our work, as scholars, to search and re-search these mixed and convoluted inheritances for tales anciently told, for ancestors that have spoken and written about the matters at hand, so that the doorstep tale becomes a gateway into a

larger life, a larger living, a larger commiseration, and I can experience the confines of my own telling opening up beyond the stifle of my own joys and sorrows:

I don't want to "tell my story." I want to be relieved of it by going to a place (ecos -, topos -/topica -) where I can meet others who can read me back to myself from beyond my own failings and limits and delusions, beyond the story I've presumed. (Jardine, 2016, p. xvi)

Interpretive work is charged with not cleaning these stories up, blunting their sting, making them palatable, non-contradictory, smooth and easy. It is charged, instead, with "restoring life to its original difficulty" (Caputo, 1987, p. 2), a restoration that is necessary because of the oppression and repression of the suffering and hope of, well, all of us, under falsely assuring rubrics and cold steel confidences and marketing gimmicks that want to hear nothing of our living and dying.

Through such bringing-to-awareness of the messes we are in, there is the possibility of some relief from, or at least some possibility of commiseration over, the only-seemingly-binding character of our living and our lives by studying the fabric of the world in which we are living and of which my own tale is simply a part:

This fabric is more abundant, more forgiving and generous and difficult than any one of our lives alone can measure, so, in exploring these things, in studying thus in the presence and grace of each other, I can be relieved of some narrow confine of my "self" by working it out, not simply working on it. This is why [interpretive work] feels spacious even when that fabric binds and pulls at my attention. (Jardine, 2016, p. xv)

Let's be blunt, then: "the aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom" (Smith, 1999c, p. 29), hard-won and always in need of re-winning. As goes an old hermeneutic saw, every text, every tale told, can be read as the answer to a question that could have been answered differently and therefore, every reading of every text is possible, not necessary, thus issuing a sort of relief from what appears to be intransigent, dominant confines. The life-world is *interpretable*.

Interpretive work, therefore, is *precisely* of "practical value" (Moules et al., 2017, p. 1). It is why Hans-Georg Gadamer named hermeneutics a "practical philosophy" (2007a) with a "practical task" (2007c), because it casts us back into the trouble of living now having seen through and broken the spell of the dominant surface stories that have held us in thrall. When it is well done, it is "of interest" (Moules et al., 2017, p. 1) to readers *precisely because* it is about their lived experience of being-in-the-middle-of-things (Latin, *inter + esse*).

I'm here reminded of an image from David G. Smith that I've often cited, that casts this in light of his and my common work in pedagogy, in schools: "whether . . . life itself has a chance, or whether the surface is all there is" (Smith, 1999, p. 139).

III

Instead of taking on the terribly difficult work of venturing, deliberately and with all the poise that scholarship helps us muster, into the roil of living, those of us involved in interpretive research seem stuck, again and still, like recent elections have demonstrated, with having to spend our time going to fund-raising dinners that seem bent on ignoring those doorstep voices, those haunts of lives, in favour of kowtowing, as Moules et al. show so well, to what wealthy donors want and how they want it served up: “an ordering of things according to the wishes, prejudices, or promptings of the powerful” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 261). We seem stuck, more than ever, with giving an account of what we are doing in such pernicious detail that we have little time to do any of the slow, meticulous work of thinking, of listening, of reading through the life and language we have inherited and the ancestors and elders who whisper, and therefore reading the world more acutely as a consequence.

That is not what those invested in the status quo want. They want work that is compliant of this status. They do not want the suffering of life to become legible, *especially* to those who are suffering and who, in being asked to speak to their lives, just might have the chance to raise their heads out of the tangles when they realize what has been perpetrated, how they have been had by what passes for “the real world,” for being “just the way things are.”

When such ideas were posed to an exhausted high-school teacher, he said of his hurry and exhaustion, “*this* is the real world.” He was, at first, shocked to hear my answer:

The world of schooling is not “the real world.” It is just how the world has thus far happened to turn out, and the causes and conditions of such turning can be understood, unraveled, and we can unravel ourselves from this turning and, in small, sometimes quite meager and temporary ways (given the largeness of the looming of things), take a breath. This experience is immediate and intimate, but it takes repeated practice and hard study to release and realize this immediacy, and even then it is not released once and for all and it is easily and understandably frightened off. As the exigencies of every life rise up, so, too, rises up the tendency to retrench, harden and once again conceal. (Jardine, 2016, pp. xvi-xvii)

Once I can get some distance from the doorstep of my own exhaustion, a glimpse is possible (a glimpse, daresay, that is precisely and deliberately prevented by the regimes of exhaustion themselves). The efficiency movement (Jardine, 2016, pp. 179-192; Kanigel, 2005; Taylor, 1903, 1911), which took hold of education early in the 20th century, demands and produces exhaustion and rush in order to keep workers in line. Thus, intimacy of this teacher’s expression of his lived-experience, in such an exchange, gets both confirmed and denied. His exhaustion seems even closer at hand, and, at the same time, he is allowed to experience some wider, more hidden truth about the arrival of his circumstances, a truth that was being blocked by the flat declarations about “the real world.” What he is experiencing is now experienced as *possible* (having arisen from causes and conditions that are not permanent and fixed) but not *necessary* (not just “the real world”). It is, that is, interpretable. This, of course, can increase one’s sorrow, finding out that the conditions of exhaustion remain dominant even though that dominance is now transparent.

As David Smith once said to me, interpretive work is not designed to give you a good night's sleep.

And when that high school teacher decried the lack of initiative in his students, I cited the originator of that very same efficiency movement, Fredrick Winslow Taylor (who was hired by the United States Department of Education to re-think schools and make them more efficient): “we do not ask for the initiative of our men. *We do not want any initiative.* All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quickly” (cited in Kanigel, 2005, p. 169, emphasis is mine). So, the intimately experienced lack of initiative of students is not just a subjective report by a particular teacher, nor is it simply a property of “kids these days.” In interpretive work, it is treated as a potential herald of multiple threads that have come to bind our living. To caricature it as “his subjective opinion,” or to pin it on the wantonness of today's youth, are outrageous and profoundly illiterate attempts to marginalize these doorstep tales in precisely those ways that wish to keep them impotent and compliant and obedient and silent, that wish to prevent them from being interpreted as perhaps insightful about our circumstances and what we have forgotten. Ask: Who profits from the exhaustion of teachers, of scholars? Who benefits from the well-trained compliance of students entering the world? Who finds it worthwhile that a student learns full well that the only real question is “Tell me exactly what you want and I'll do it”? Dominance.

So, could this high-school teacher's statement have been interpreted differently? Of course. Welcome to the tough work of interpretation that must, as part of its work, always try to make the case for why it makes the case the way it does, thereby sharpening and critiquing its own presumptions in light of the object being investigated and the ever-new circumstances of its appearance. What becomes visible that was once occluded? What is remembered in such an interpretation that has been forgotten? What now seem to be a living issue rather than something over and done with and dead? (see Moules, 2015). Under the heading of interpretive research there is a whole unruly family of ways to take up these questions of waking up and clarifying the conditions under which we are living.

IV

Is it Really “Yesterday's War”? What Gadamer Has to Say About What Gets Counted thus raises and goes well beyond issues of “research methods.” But it is also about research and its ways and presumptions. As it articulates so well, there are very complex ontological and epistemological issues involved in this reputed war over research paradigms. That it could arise all over again as if we had never been through this before is one more example of that old adage, that when those who fought the war before and won the peace die off or fade from view, the prospects of a new war that remembers nothing of its cost, increase.

I want to add to this conversation about these ontological and epistemological issues by thinking more about *the object of investigation* in interpretive work. Qualitative and quantitative research are not warring over different ways, different methods, differing criteria of how to properly approach the same object. The object of each is different and each, I suggest, tries to measure up properly to its own.

The object of investigation in qualitative research is not a “thing” with properties to be discovered and named under regimes of “control, prediction and manipulation” (Habermas, 1972, p. 21), but is, rather, a long and contested, and emergent lineage of images, ideas, choices, possibilities, occlusions, inclusions, victories, defeats, silences and voices. The suffering of a young child, or the effort to learn to pronounce a new word (Jardine, 2016, pp. 290-291), for example, is not a separately determinable object that somehow “is what it is” and is then, *post hoc*, voiced in various ways, seen from various perspectives, such that we could then somehow compare this variety to this pre-determined object. The object being considered by interpretive work is that very various-ness. “Only in the multifariousness of voices does it exist” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 284). And that variousness varies over time. This is its emergent, living, contested, nature. This is the “real world” of the life-world, to *be* thus. This is why Gadamer (1989) cites the examples of law and art in order to try to get hold of the character of knowledge in interpretive work. In the law, a new case does not just fall under an old law, but calls that law to account for its governance. Cases – those doorstep stories – are thus “fecund” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 36). “Interpret[ing]” such cases is “the furthering of an event that goes far back” (p. xxiv), summoning precedents or using old images or new nuances, unearthing the work, say, of F.W. Taylor, and making the case for this surrounding of the case of a tale told in a high school hallway. The object under investigation in interpretive work is thus part of a *living* tradition, *as is that interpretive work itself*. As with, for example, the history of visual art, the arrival of Picasso is not just the addition of one more case that falls under already-established rules and expectations governing “art history and technique.” The arrival of his work induced the disturbing, contentious disestablishing of those very rules and expectations, and then, of course, had a hand in the slow reestablishment of that very history, now revived by a new arrival, now no longer the tradition it seemed to have been. New things become precedents that were heretofore simply ignored or lost to memory. Different things become “old fashioned” or no longer done. Things that were once silent start speaking up. This is “the real world” of a living tradition in the life world, and to expect to have the fixity prerequisite of an object of the natural sciences is to violate what it is.

We can read of a teacher who speaks of the experience of having a dying child in their Grade Two classroom and helping the children learn to live with this reality and to learn to live with it herself (see Molnar 2016). We can recoil in witness of the case being made that the developmental readers used in schools (so ordinary, so *de rigueur* in their dominance of classroom practices in the early grades) have an affinity to issues of colonialism and the loss of the tracks of one’s people (Tait, 2007). Someone else writes of the loss of her cousin, Shelby, to cancer (Latremouille, 2014) and the parent of a child of the same fate, writes in response (see Jardine 2014a, p. 1), and this beckoned me to suggest that “this is why we read. This is why we write” (Jardine, 2014b). The investigation of such things must itself not demand that these things *be* differently than they *are*.

This is why I hold this difficult passage from Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) so near and dear:

Knowledge [in interpretive work] is not a projection in the sense of a plan, the extrapolation of the aims of the will, an ordering of things according to the wishes, prejudices, or promptings of the powerful; rather, it remains something adapted to the object, a *mensuratio ad rem*. [This, please note, is true of and apparent in the natural

sciences as well as the human sciences. However, the object of the natural sciences is a different object, and therefore the measure of its adaptation is different; see below] Yet this thing [in the human sciences] is not a *factum brutum* [a “brute fact” that “is what it is,” thus laying out the task, in the natural sciences, of finding and pinning down what it is] but itself ultimately has the same mode of being [being human]. [In the human sciences] neither the knower [the one doing interpretive research] nor the known [the object being interpreted] is “present-at-hand.” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 261)

A tough read, especially for anyone who thinks that, in interpretive work, you just get to say what you think and make things up.

Here is an elaboration of this passage, including a slightly different and illuminating translation of some of these thoughts. In interpretive work:

Both the one who understands and the thing that is understood “are” historically, that is, in the process of unfolding themselves over time, and neither the one who understands nor the thing understood “are” statically present [-at-hand] independently of each other. Both “are” in their interactive development. Hence, understand is still a *mensuratio ad rem*, as Gadmaer puts it, or, in another traditional formulation, an *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, except that the “adequation” of the intellect, its measuring and fitting of itself, is never to a timeless thing that always is what it is, some brute fact, “determinable” and independent of the one who knows it [or the lived circumstances in which that knower lives – knowing of Picasso, e.g., is no what it used to be]. Hence, I suggest that we might better speak of a reciprocal *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, of the temporary adequation of two entities, intellect [me attempting to hear of this teacher’s experiences with the full weight of what I know of our shared and contested intellectual ancestries] and thing [this story, here, now, pleading both up out of and to that ancestry], to each other, each in their particular historical development at the given time. (Smith, 2011, pp. 24-5)

Part of interpretive work involves reading these passages of Gadamer’s and Smith’s with all the open-eared audacity that we try to give to our so-called “participants” in a research study, because each of these clusters of texts (“the literature,” the interpreter’s background study of the phenomenon being investigated, and the “data” [interviews, transcripts, anecdotes, written missives from participants, and so on) must learn to speak to one another if the interpretive study is to be successful. Each clarifies and expands the other and frees it from its limitations. Each relieves the other. The literature relieves the doorstep tale of its “my story”-ness by reading it out into a world of lost relations and occluded ancestries; and the doorstep tale relieves the literature of its moribund erudition and danger of closing the case, by calling it to account, here, now, the door just ajar.

Interpretive work therefore tends to sometimes be hesitant and indirect, not in an attempt to obfuscate an object that is itself clear, but in order to bring out the obtuse and myriad and unfinished character of the object itself.

V

After all, who is to say once and for all what might become of grief and how we live with it and talk about it and hide it and suffer it as the world shifts around us? Who would have thought that this war would have reared up again and we'd have to parse our way through it all over again?

Years ago, in an informal conversation with Hans-Georg Gadamer in his office at McMaster University, he told me that the care-laden work of interpretation is “internal to Being-in-the-world -- a process of inner clarification – rather than its domineering father” (Jardine, 2015, p. 16), and it has taken, it still takes some doing to learn to live with this gentle, encouraging admonition. Interpreting our living is what living does all by itself. It is not the property of research. Research is one of its cousins, one of its specialized forms. And, as David G. Smith quipped years ago, once you kick the old man out of the house who could domineer over these matters of living, *now* what are you going to do?

You can rest assured that there is no unifying methodology or realm of concern or emphasis or unanimity in interpretive work itself. It is quite akin to a family gathering whose kinships and claims to lineage and importance and urgency are always up for debate, the sort debates that only gatherings of relatives can betray.

You can rest assured, as well, that some in this gathering will find this paper far too heated, while others will find it timid and cowardly.

Welcome to the life world, then, and to the unfortunate circumstance that always faces those marginalized, of being asked to fight a war premised on thin air. How about this? Welcome, instead, to the doorstep and the troublesome invitation to step out into the wild of things.

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