

“To Be Dying Under Their Wings is a Weird Miracle”

David W. Jardine

Abstract

In this paper, the author responds to the Moules and Estefan (2018) Editorial “Watching My Mother Die: Subjectivity and the Other Side of Dementia” with a hermeneutic interpretation of memory, remembering, forgetting, grief, and subjectivity.

Keywords

hermeneutics, Gadamer, grief, memory, subjectivity, ecology

As in spinning a thread, we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. Don't say “There *must* be something common”. . .but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think but look! We see a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances.” (*Familienähnlichkeiten*).

Ludwig Wittgenstein, from *Philosophical Investigations* (1968, p. 32)

Thelma's Other Side

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I only met Thelma Moules once, on exactly the same day that the sunflowers appeared and housed themselves in my memory (Jardine, 2018a), a vivid day, strangely more so now than then, as per the exacting vagaries of memory. This image cluster buffed and come to shine with attention. It seems, once again as before, that it must have coalesced of its own accord into something that could be tucked away in a recess and called up, now, reading “Watching my Mother Die -- Subjectivity and the Other Side of Dementia” (Moules & Estefan, 2018).

To be honest, I only barely recall Thelma’s face. I’d even forgotten her name but recognized it right away whilst reading. Thelma. A great old-as-the-hills name, that, as is the phrase “old as the hills.” Of that meeting day I mostly remember her even-then thinning hair and the brightness of the shine of her skull’s skin amidst the sparse stalks of sun and sparkle of light.

Reading Nancy’s words, the very first thing that jumped up was that grief is always *someone’s*. General concepts, expressions, ideas, theories, descriptions, themes, necessarily leave out one of its primal features -- its *closeness*, its *rattling immediacy* up and down the spine, in and out the in- and out-breaths, its being *mine* and no one else’s in a way that is not diminished no matter how much I share, how much I write or tell the tale or hug or weep.

It does not exhaust even when it seems it has.

But it does round back in memory apses, naves and niches, tucks and folds, images, glimpses and nods. It composes itself and thereby composes me and thereby decomposes, slowly, only to be shred open again at the whiff of something that reminds. Dying and its reaches are long-lived, even in forgetting.

I Am Not a Subject

But all this doesn’t make my experiences subjective, because I am not a subject. Me being cast as a subject is an existential cast-off of the very objectivism that hermeneutics is *also* not especially interested in kowtowing to, contesting, or vying for or against. I am not a subject. I am one of us, one of your kin Nancy, Andrew, John, Thelma. I grieve right out in the full, dark sun of the world and even my experience of isolation and loneliness in grief is long-since understood as one of our lots in life, one we share variously, in weird and familiar ways, proximally, and at a distance. Even in the intimate moment that I feel that it is mine to suffer alone, this feeling is confirmed by paging through Picasso’s blue period, or through speeding past a deer carcass at the side of the highway and see the Ravens cackily, joyously gathering, feasting. These multifarious voices, stories, glimpses, images, don’t replace one another but cumulate, with each added tale rattling spinning like fiber on fiber, making it new and old at the same time. Thelma Irene Moules. Reta Lenore Jardine becomes weirdly legible again having been long since forgotten. “Only in the multifariousness of voices does [‘my experience’] exist” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 284). It is not an inner state once you exhale. And hermeneutics suggests that perhaps you should, exhale that is. Speak. Write. These are ways to not only “make memory last” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 391) but to let my own experiences be borne up where they belong, in the *Familienähnlichkeiten* of the earth’s fabrics and tugs and pulls. Like air under wings. And even if I pull back “inwards,” this interior is familiar territory. I am not alone in my lone. This is an ecological truth. Subjectivity, borne as a buttress against the vagaries and irrationalities of the early 20th century, hides the fact that, in its retreats, it affirms precisely that which sent us, full of

anxiety and dread, scurrying into ourselves, forgetting that these very selves that seemed a refuge against those vagaries were, to a hidden degree, the invention of that *from which* we retreated. This is why stories must be allowed to speak *out*, why they must be placed in broad and abundant fields of living relations and not be caught back in the captures of retreat. Grieve out loud. Otherwise, it is an *ecological*, not just personal, disaster.

The Past is Turning out to be Different than it Was

I get it. All this seems contradictory. Get over it. One can't rescue the life-world from its multifarious contradictoriness by trying to portion off the varieties of its ways into the "moist gastric intimac[ies]" (Sartre, 1970, p. 4) of various subjects. The contra, in the life-world's contradictoriness, is not just in and between the dictions underneath or behind which there is a non-contradictory world. The life-world itself *is* full of contradictions, occlusions, variegations, mixed blood, unclear turns, upheavals, impenetrable mysteries and revelations that come and go, rise and fall, emerge and perish. We all know this. It does not follow the logic of identity and difference, of "it is" or "it isn't." It is woven, instead, in an ecologic of interrelatedness, of *textus*, weave and catch-a-thread unravelling and weave again. The one new thread suddenly makes the ones that have become old and familiar different than they used to be. The past, as Nancy's writing hints, is turning out to be different than it was. Even finished events are unfinished, just like Picasso's work did not simply add itself to a list of art history but changed how we might understand that history. Precedents, exemplars, turn out to be some different than they used to be. Nancy Moules was not born as just one more in a line of blood but renders that line re-spun. John and Thelma turn out to be something different that they were, and they will again, even in this wee way of having their names mentioned in writing, their names read in reading. I've turned out differently because of them and her. We are not subjects simply subjected to this. We are earth beings who *are* in this weird way.

The summer after I wrote about John Moules death and recalled those monstrous sunflowers at his house (Jardine, 2018a), my own back garden got inundated by sunflower-volunteers grown from the happenstance scattershots of bird seed over the winter. And Nancy and I are caught to wonder what it means. And it doesn't *mean* anything. And yet it does. We are both weavers and woven, and which is which is which is always "yet-to-be-decided" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 119), again, again.

The Job of Hermeneutics and an Old Biblical Matter

The job of hermeneutics is not to step in and stop this process. It is not bent on straightening this out or solve this puzzle, but to puzzle over it and gather us together around our bespoke kin, Nancy, here, and Thelma, and John at a greater distance, but nearer because of it. And Ravens, too, and sunflowers each lean in to listen to the gathering.

This is why hermeneutic work needs to use language that fails in the task to name its topic once and for all, not because of a desire to be vague or "poetic," but because such halty, stumbly, gooey, etchy, sly and hinty words bespeak the tremble of how lived experience is lived, what lived experience *is*. It's the old *mensuratio ad rem* thing again. Objectivity is too dumb-ass a thing to ask of living, and subjectivity, its modern consort, also fails the test of *adaequatio*. Objectivity and subjectivity are equally/oppositely *inadequate* to lived experience. This is the great value of Andrew Estefan's part of "Watching my Mother Die -- Subjectivity and the Other

Side of Dementia.” It takes great detail and careful study to see through these inheritances we too easily presume. To take what seems to be a given, what seems to be something obvious, and to “make the object” -- in this case, “subjectivity” -- “and all its possibilities fluid” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 367) is part of the “skilled art of questioning” (p. 367) that is vital to hermeneutic insight.

The tough task of hermeneutic work is that, in order to be understood and communicated and commiserated-over, lived experiences are not to be tossed, shall we say, “upward” into a regnant idea or generality or theme or pattern and then fetched down by others to apply to their situation too, or in order to adjust the soaring idea so as to better ensure its flight. Grief shall not be lifted up. It graves. So even when “what is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 395), these new relations are now drawn into the orbit of this contingency through a recognition of the contingency of their own living and the slap-back echo urged in the arches of air and sun.

Understanding, here and therefore, is always, shall we say, a lateral pass, a toss of likeness, of verisimilitude (Gadamer, 1960/1989, pp. 20-21), analogy, allegory, metaphor, interruption, startle, familiarity and the strange be-wariness that familiarity makes possible. This is like that but -- tricked you! -- no it’s not. This brushes up against an old biblical matter that I wished I had discussed with John Moules. It is the non-monotheistic, hermeneutic logic of a non-believer, of one who, instead, finds everywhere the experience of “breaking open” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 362) into relations of dependent co-arising. There is not one True Incarnation of the Eidos, no one True Word that is sovereign over all that it governs, that is the Perfection, the Essence (or, more softly put as per “interpretive research,” the Theme) of that which it names. Instead, there are multiple incarnations, each of which are suggestive, not of the One True Logos *of which* they are the variegated incarnations but instead, *of each other*. We live our lives akin. Each suggests all the others, laterally and each “stubborn particular” (Wallace, 1989) is thus “whole” without each needing to be being redeemed by some univocal singularity which arches over all and in which, to use the Platonic image, each “participates” in relations of proximity and distance.

“A Special Effort of Memory”

Now the trouble with this is at least double. First, the receiver of such a lateral pass --the reader of a hermeneutic piece -- must engage in a precarious, deeply risky calling up and:

running up and down the known *range* of cases to which [the topic being discussed] applies, by actually calling up the spectrum of *different* exemplifications and then *catching the point*. (Norris-Clarke, p. 67)

That work of “the spontaneous and inventive seeking out of similarities” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 432) is what hermeneutics names as the “basis of the life of language” (p. 432). *Here* is where the counterpoint of “objectivity” resides:

It requires a special effort of memory to recall that, alongside the scientific ideal of unambiguous designation, th[is spontaneous and inventive seeking out of family resemblances constitutes the] life of language itself [and] continues unchanged. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, pp. 433-434)

The topic must be allowed to “to expand to its full analogous breadth of illuminative meaning” (Norris-Clarke, 1976, p. 72).

That, by itself, is tough work enough and it points to how, in order adequately be myself, I must read, I must study the vagaries in all the forms I can muster. And here is the rub. Read well if it is well-written, *my own living will find itself at stake*, summoned up to bear witness, to sing, to lament. To understand. To write this.

Having to be Not Remembered

Understanding is the expression of the affinity of the one who understands to the one whom he understands and to that which he understands. (Gadamer, 1983, p. 48).

From Old French *afinite*, “relationship, kinship; neighbourhood, vicinity.” (On-Line Etymological Dictionary)

I can't stop thinking about the intertwining of two things.

First, losing the memory of one's loves -- that weird and seemingly inevitable time-fade, where the voice cadence can't quite be recalled, where the old photo startles with something lost to the wear of living, where a small, forgotten object hides unbeknownst and unexpectedly triggers memory.

Second, remembering how one's loved one lost their memory. Lost their memory *of me*. My own mother drifted off into a playful spot, with a clutched Teddy Bear, and when my son visited her in her final days, she thought he was perhaps me? perhaps just back from World War II, from overseas? and her husband (actually long-dead) was off getting the bags out of the car for vacation and the lovely restaurant they have here, where you can eat for free! Lucky me and her and us to have it happen that way.

But Nancy writes, and I read. It's not just losing a parent but having to live with the fact that they lost you in their waning days and *then* died. They take something of you with them in any case. But to take the memory of you ahead of time is a tough matter -- to be unremembered, to somehow disappear, right before the eyes of your parent.

In Alzheimer's, it is as if I have died, *as if I had never lived*, right in front of their eyes, even though, well, *here I am*. To be alive to witness my own death in the eyes of a loved one is a strange, strange thing. To be able to write about it, to be able to have that writing read, is an old cluster of our deeply human arts of living and dying.

When her mother died, Nancy was no longer having to live with being not remembered. What an utterly weird relief, eh? Same as with my own mother, whose traverse into final reverie was far sweeter than most. For Reta, it became a family resemblance mix-up and mash-up and she was not frightened or angry. Just lucky happenstance, that. It wasn't like I wasn't remembered. It was like I was part of the mix up. Freeing, in its own ambiguous way.

An Ecological Aside Regarding Memory and Place-Value

Another happenstance drifted by in the orbit of “Watching my Mother Die -- Subjectivity and the Other Side of Dementia.” I haven’t worked it out adequately, yet, but it is the closest I’ve come to glimpsing this land. Just a broken-up sketch, then:

. . . this very same sort of memory/forgetting . . . driving into south Calgary on Saturday along hwy. 22 . . . all the construction, with many of the old, familiar signposts and figures and trees and fields torn up. . . had the feeling, not simply that I didn't quite know where I was, but that I knew *exactly* where I was, but that *this place doesn't remember me being there at all*. Like I'd been forgotten, erased from tree-memory, earth-memory, or something . . . after all those drive-bys, all that attention and devotion . . . right there in the midst of me lamenting its shifts and remembering its shapes, it forgets . . . me, trying to be so in touch with the place and feeling its perishings, and having it spurn like that . . . it's not just that I've lost something, but that something has lost me. This happened to me a lot when I was young. The town I grew up in had these repeated ravagings of the living grass and field and bird and flat dirt path surroundings to make way for spiking population growth . . . and it wasn't just that places I remembered were gone, but that *the places that remembered me were gone* . . . could no longer remember. That I had become forgotten by the land itself . . . a small version of a First Nations lament that I can hardly stand to have so near . . .

Great moon, eagle moon, goose moon, frog moon
Tethered
Here

Lesley Tait (from Latremouille, Tait & Jardine, in press)

And then this, written, my oh my, twenty years ago after my first return from Alberta back to Southern Ontario where I was raised:

How things smell, the racket of leaves turning on their stems, how my breath pulls this humid air, how birds songs combine, the familiar directions of sudden thundery winds, the rising insect drills of cicada tree buzzes that I remember so intimately, so immediately, that when they sound, it feels as if this place itself has remembered what I have forgotten, as if my own memory, my own raising, some of my own life, is stored up in these trees for safe keeping. Cicadas become archaic storytellers telling me, like all good storytellers, of the life I'd forgotten I'd lived, of deep, fleshy, familial relations that worm their ways out of my belly and breath into these soils, these smells, this air. And I'm left shocked that they know so much, that they remember so well, and that they can be so perfectly articulate. (Jardine, 1998, p. 92)

A Terribly Shareable Incommensurateness

And, of course, to be not remembered by a mother, the very one whose remembering of me shaped me for good or ill as much as anyone and for a long stretch of my life, back when none of this was able to be articulated enough to be anywhere near free of, well, *that* has a terribly shareable incommensurateness.

The very one whose remembering of me greatly shaped my way in this family resemblance (and this, of course, for good or ill, well-meant or otherwise), in losing their memory, loses me, but loosens as well:

Echoed perhaps in a ripple of air or a brief shrug of a robust bough.

...

Alone now, they wind through tangles, relentless. Call up to the creators; we are here, we are here.

...

Tender parting and elegant flow, a silent passing above the forest floor. Wings raise up to gain favour and soften the looming perch. (Innes, 2014, pp. 117, 110, 117)

So, here's to my own pate glowing red in the hairbrush sparsenings of grey and white. To mothers. To fathers. To sunflowers and the loft of Ravens.

So, there go the Ravens, my dears, again caught and uncaught on the warm Spring-air foothill uplifts. To be dying under their wings is a weird miracle. (Jardine, 2018b, p. xiii)

And brightness and darkness, remembering and forgetting, here in this great hermeneutic commiseration.

I hope it is arced just a bit by sweet looms of sunflowers.

Afterword

Nancy Moules, 9:03AM, November 15th, 2018: I noted that you wrote that you only met Thelma once. You actually met her a few times and she had a bit of a crush on you because you gave her a kiss. The first time was at a graduation party that Lori Limacher had for me. Then there was the time with the sunflowers, but I know there was one more time. She liked that you acted interested in her and listened to her.

Memory. Turns out I'm sweeter than I recall. Or so someone else remembered me in ways I'd forgotten.

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