
Guest Editorial:

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A List of Christmas Gifts at Year's End

David W. Jardine



Corresponding Author:
David W. Jardine, PhD
Professor Emeritus, University of Calgary
Email: jardine@ucalgary.ca

Here we sit near the end of a solar cycle, *solstice* very nearby, the lowering of light soon to stop, and light again to beg a slow returning. It is little wonder that there are celebrations because we can all so easily imagine that the returning arc might not happen. For each of us it someday will not, *and* it will also go on without me.

Just like a sunflower will phototropically turn without my love and attention.

Lately, I'm troubled down into rabbit holes and echo-chambers, the newly invoked, dull-minded images of enclosure, self-talk, and the ravaging of interpretive insight in favour of quarrels over fake fakeries. It hurts:

I write this confused. Simply put, I feel culpable for helping, in a very minor and small way, to set loose a beast that seems to have become dangerous. Perhaps it was always dangerous. Interpretation run amok into utter self-enclosed self-referential self-isolationism, this-is-my-story-ism or, more simply "I think this. Done." This worry doesn't take sides in advance. This worry is always easy to try and pin on "them" and not "us." That, too, floods with guilt. It is too easy to see this as an attempt to revert to exactly what the interpretive impulse had freed us from. Hegemonies of grand narratives [at work but not even suspected]. The burgeoning naively suspect of surface stories the angry clashes of which satisfy without illumination or interruption. It appears as a re-summoning to silence this voice or that. [Or to just let everyone talk at the same time]. To even suggest that things might be otherwise than "my experience" seems to belie the freedoms finally hard-won. The slippages between signifier and signified felt like such a liberation at first and long since and still. To emerge out from under sedimented presumptions, dominating voices, long-writ stories told numbingly frequently, to find the fresh airs of interpretive possibilities and the utter thrills of how language and bloodlines and ancestries and new voices can crackle and spark along unforeseen lines and pathways, quickening us. . . challenging, refreshing, humiliating who this "us" might be. "The uninitiated," the unpracticed, "have no proper vessel. They carry water in a sieve and pour it into a perforated jar" (Hillman, 2013, p. 220). Hermeneutics is, in part, the preparation of a proper vessel (with the full knowledge that each new life, new idea, new arising, new perishing, will involve, in part, preparing the vessel all over again in ways that *it* [this new case] needs that I couldn't quite foresee without it. It is a practice that takes practice, but it doesn't result in being practiced, but in being perhaps a bit more *ready to practice all over again*. (Jardine, in press)

I know. Who gets to say what a "proper" vessel might be? Properness – a sense of proportion, propriety, of shapeliness -- that old, often-ignored portion of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989, pp. 110-120) called "The transformation of [the play of things and ideas and images and opinions and so on] into structure" – is as much in need of suspicion as anything else. So many students reading Gadamer would be disappointed when we got there in his book, after the refreshing and freeing revelries of play as a clue to how understanding works – "boisterous merrymaking" (Online Etymological Dictionary, under "revelry," n.d.) suddenly tasked with the tough work of *making something worthwhile* of such reels and Spiels.

Again, I know. Who is to say what's worthwhile, right?

So, I turn and spin again, feeling closer to a grave-spinning with each turn. Solstice. A whiling time. And I find myself trying to write a paper entitled “When the hermeneutics of suspicion becomes suspicious” (see Gadamer, 1984), knowing full well that there can be no sure-fire list that results in addressing such a title adequately and once and for all. Hermeneutics cannot know in advance of proceeding whether what results is too much, too nuts, too self-involved, too serious, too trivial, too detailed, or not enough. Each of these feels like it is bumping up against an attempt to be measured. And this, these days, in the flickering screenlights, seems to have no hope at all of becoming a place of rest or contemplation. I find myself feeling oddly culpable for some of the utter madness of fake news being called fake (“That’s just what you think!”), of every opinion being legitimized by the sheer act of being opined, and the helpless feelings of scattershot-ness and unbridled, unpracticed, undisciplined interpretive madneses.

And still, the name of the journal in which Gadamer’s “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion” was published in English is *Man and World*. Huh, there it is again.

So, then, the strange relief of what happens when such interpretive suspicions run up against topics that are able to be taken seriously enough to halt the skidding imagination, the over-wet pens and weepy opines, the over-wielded subjugations of readers to subjectivities run amok. That are able to fill me up with wonder over our shared and contested lives.

So, here’s a Cheers! to 2023 and to a table of contents laid rich with topics that, *if we are able to let them*, hold our hearts and minds steady, and ask for carefulness, measuredness, propriety and meticulous attention.

Even this list itself can start to still the babbling:

Time. The Unexpected. Grief. Responsibility. Literature And Its Careful Review. The Pull of Stars Around Childbirth. Under a Century of Pandemics. The Eulogy. Haunting Portraits and Sick Children, The Wagers of Community. Imposters. Well-Being. The Overwhelms of Questions.

Okay, I admit it. I manipulated the list a bit so it would be twelve topics near solstice. An advent calendar. My true love gave to me. . . . Advents:

Understanding is an adventure and, like any adventure, it always involves some risk. (Gadamer, 1983, p. 141).

[An] adventure is ‘undergone’, like a test or a trial from which one emerges enriched and more mature.” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 69)

Topics and a dedication to them and their well-being, can slow attention, can hone and shape interpretive skill and deftness, can beckon beautiful words as this year’s work has shown. Watch out, though:

Because he is pointing to something, he has to exaggerate, whether he likes it or not . . . to leave out and to heighten. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 113)

All interpretation is highlighting. (p. 400)

Yes, but interpretation is not dedicated to itself and its own proliferation. Its highlightings, heightenings, and exaggerations are *on behalf of the find proper measure in the ins and outs of the topic* one is trying to articulate, and free it to be open to good hearted, well-intended, ongoing conversation. Making beautiful the invitation of writer and reader alike into the full range of their beauties, there painful and pleasureable and often contradictory and murky ways, their costs and the gifts we receive in paying proper attention.

There it is again! Proper.

So, my thanks and thoughts to those making JAH a good place. The fraying that questions can do, that Nancy Moules addresses in her editorial this past year, and what our job might be in the face of that, is important to consider. Consider: The interpretive impulse just might be akin an invasive species that runs rack and ruin through fields that can't hold it at bay. What is it that helps hermeneutics not just run amok? Fields of relations [*topos*] and taking proper care of them, that is care that might bear fruit, might bear one more round of sustenance and life. It is why I've always found it deeply ecological in character. Having the soils get to sedimented and unworkable won't help. Blowing them all away in a rush to overstimulate and underwork and overwhelm and exhaust it and myself is of no good use.

One more little secret. I've got two grandchildren nearby, at arm's length. Safe, sound. Alive. Right as I'm thinking of Gaza and Israel and, well, how many locales of new life and grief would you like me to list? I've got little time left *anyway*, and I must save my words and my energies for finding out how to give up on trying to ameliorate the yelling, the distractions, the buzz feeds, and their terribly satisfying lures. I have to protect myself and protect that rare and precious gift, a real, good suspicion that yields love and affection and more fruits and more love.

So, happy solstice.

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