

Some Introductory Words For Two Little Earth-Cousins

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Out from behind his oxygen mask
As if he were just my good old, familiar little earth-cousin.
from Jodi Latremouille, "My Treasured Relation"

Cancer really is one of "those" words. Two days ago, an old friend, Fernando, died of it, and the funeral is this Thursday, January 23rd--lung cancer come down hard and fast, as it often does. And then there's me at 8 years old and my mother, 1958, undergoing a radical mastectomy. Drawn living room curtains for weeks, a big wicker laundry basket full of neighbors' tiny presents, one to be opened each day, smells of soaps and lotions and other notions, meant to help stretch out time's lingering, I guess, and to show wee affections without words, without "that" word. Easy to recall how many had to disappear from view, unable to be present to such things. Understandable in its own sad way. Makes my own skin lesions over the past couple of years seem quite silly in comparison, not only because they are less severe and the suffering is near nil (although hearing "that" word chills nevertheless), but because, at the level of our living and dying, cancer is always incomparable. It follows an old Gadamerian (1989, p. 39) adage: "the individual case . . . is not exhausted by being a particular example of a universal law or concept." My doctor and I joked about how this could be some sort of long-in-arriving anniversary--maybe even the summer of 1958, too much sun swimming at the Second Tower with my brother and father in Burlington, and the great peels of skin afterwards. Funny how cancer takes its time sometimes, sometimes as fleet as the quick of life itself, and sometimes, well, as sheer chance would have it, my mother lived till 2002.

Of course, as Jodi Latremouille's wonderful, heartbreaking writing "My Treasured Relation" demonstrates, broad, universal concepts and images and ideas are always needed in the act of

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articulating one's experience. We always run the risk of using words that can be understood differently than we meant. This circumstance is in the very nature of writing and reading itself and it is why the *mens auctoris* is not the lynchpin of hermeneutic work (Gadamer, 2007, p. 57). It is also why hermeneutic research is so bloody difficult. You have to be disciplined and rigorous and attentive to handle this circumstance gracefully and well. Remaining true to the intimacy of this "special case" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 39), dear Shelby, is an especially difficult form of research that requires generosity, patience, perseverance, discipline, stillness and wisdom (6 aspired to "perfections," [Sanskrit: *paramitas*; see Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, 2002, 2004]).

All clustered, of course, around impermanence. "We will have to hold firmly to the standpoint of finiteness" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 99), both in the topics we consider and in the expended breath of our consideration itself. Why? Because the topic of a hermeneutic study *is* finite as is our insight into it. "Future generations will understand differently" (p. 340) and therefore, the purpose of a hermeneutic inquiry is to "keep [the topic] open for the future" (p. 340).

We already know this. Cancer will never leave our consciousness. There are myriad ways of experiencing it, articulating it, investigating it, naming it, and these have cascaded down to us over time, admixed, sometimes battling each other, sometimes quelled, finally, in the soft presence of death. We can never say once and for all what needs to be said, and the worlds of swimming and breast cancer in 1958 have turned out to be something different than we could have imagined. "It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word" (Gadamer, 1989a, p. 579).

In this sense, "My Treasured Relation" is hermeneutic in its best light. It is intent on remaining true to the "stubborn particularity" (Wallace, 1987) of the case while, at the same time, drawing us into the worlds of its orbit in which we, as readers, already live. And, at once, it casts us back on our own life in this troubled life world--all this with an eye to both the opening this topic and "find[ing] that opening in each of us" (Wallace, 1987, p. 13), as readers, where we can experience our own "miraculous returns" (p. 13) to the lives we have already been leading.

This complex and pitched spiral of effects that defines the rigorousness of hermeneutic inquiry has an axis. Its goal is to remain true to its object, and Jodi Latremouille's writing finds this sweet and aching spot. It seeks the address of *this case* and that's what compels our attention and makes this compelling break out beyond the confines of the case to something that feels universal. But this is no longer a slippery universal full of Romantic wooziness. It is a universal that has been, in the best senses, humiliated by the case. Life. Childhood. Illness. Relations. Suffering. All these become disciplined and strengthened by the case itself. "It is truly an achievement of undemonstrable tact to hit the target and to discipline the application of the universal" (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 39-40). Without this discipline of application, phrases like "childhood leukemia" loses the function of "responding and summoning" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 458). They become hard categories of illness, and our responses to them become subjectivized into nothing but "moist gastric intimacy" (Sartre, 1970, p. 4). These are the two extremes that hermeneutics avoids, and the two degradations that it can fall into when it fails.

Jodi Latremouille's work thus reminds us of a hermeneutic truth, that one must avoid the temptations of casting our eyes too high. And, as with another recent piece of writing (Latremouille, in press), her work reminds us, too, of another feature of hermeneutics:

To be properly understood and articulated,. . . locales of intimacy don't lend themselves to forms of research that demand generalities or methodological anonymity as is proper to various social sciences. They demand a form of research that is proper to the object of its concern--an old Aristotelian idea, that knowledge must "remain something adapted to the object, a *mensuratio ad rem*" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 261). (Jardine, in press)

A good interpretation must be adapted to the object it is considering. Pediatric oncology can be understood as a medical condition and, understood as such it summons a certain way of writing/speaking/investigating that is proper to that object. But the cancer of a child is also understandable as a sphere of treasured relations filled with this child and no other. This is also what it *is*. In this case, *precisely* as in the case of medical research, good writing seeks its proper measure in *this* object of consideration. There is no battle here between types of research and all that worn-out piffle about qualitative and quantitative. One of these is not the "secret measure" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 112) of the other. Both forms of writing and research are "objective" in the sense that both seek to cleave properly to the object each is considering. Both seek to do justice to the thing and bring it to an illumination proper to it. Both therefore are "hermeneutic" in the sense that they both heed the demand of the *mensuratio ad rem*. Differently put, not only is all oncology hermeneutic (Moules, Jardine, McCaffrey, & Brown, 2013). Cancer, as it actually lives in the world (of families, of medicine, of nursing, of philosophy, of economics, of the tremors felt over diagnosis, of the bedsides, of the ways the word can find air in some settings of fear and trembling) *is* myriad in its being. It therefore *requires* myriad articulations in order to be properly understood in its fulsome being. "Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 284).

Hermeneutic work always involves the application of particular cases to the universals (concepts, images, hopes, desires, ideas, rules, laws, principles, themes, procedures, guidelines, expectations voice and unvoiced, and so on) that have come to guide our lives, demanding of them that they listen to the difference that the case portends and don't turn away to heavenly, self-enclosed ideation (Jardine, 2013). But it involves another form of application. "Understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 308). In reading this paper, I'm blessed with the meeting of these two earth-cousins that make me remember that I, too, and however near or distant, am a third earth cousin in this fatal round.

Interpretive work is meant to be *read interpretively*. Read this and let yourself be third.

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