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Journal of Applied Hermeneutics  
January 23, 2018  
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## Sunflowers, Coyote, and Five Red Hens

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### Preamble

Not everyone is beguiled by the hunt for double meanings, the decoding of references, the connection between sub-rhythmic dots of syllabic emphases, or the tracing of narrative arcs. [But] I do believe that those buried layers of syntactic, semantic and symbolic meaning give life to the songs, regardless of whether the listener gives a hoot about decoding them. They deepen the saturation of the colours, the concentration of feeling and the verisimilitude of the small world the songs describe. (Newsom, with Paytress, 2015, p. 86)

### Sight-Lines

I feel uneasy stepping into the great territories opened up by Nancy Moules (2017) and Kate Beamer (2017) at the tail end of last year's *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. It is not (yet) a territory I have endured as deeply. That bracketed "yet" is little more than a feeble attempt at trying to remember not to forget what surrounds us all, whatever its proximity.

There is no real refuge out of the sight-lines of impermanence, death, and grief. A shuddering thought, that this makes persistent and practiced mindfulness of these sight-lines the only reliable refuge. It is no accident that contemporary hermeneutics, in its ventures to speak about our living circumstances, is inevitably surrounded by penumbras of finitude and its ins and outs, and how, or whether, or to what extent, I have come to live with this inevitably.

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This is wound into the flesh of *any and all topics* of *any* interpretive delve: “the concept of substance is . . . inadequate. [There is a] radical challenge to thought implicit in this inadequacy” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 242). The challenge is simple. What shall we say, what shall we do, in the face of the reality of impermanence? We want to speak clearly and openly but without foreclosure or finality. We want to invite others into this open wound and help them calm themselves and become composed and undistracted if they do. That is what these two authors have done for us.

When their teacher, Edmund Husserl (1970, p. 7), desperately asked “Can we console ourselves with that? Can we live in this world?” his students’ answer was a resounding yes, yes, *this* is the locale of our solidarity and hope. The good news, the hermeneutic consolation, is that “everything around us teaches impermanence” (Tsong-kha-pa. 2000, p. 151). Everything around us teaches us precisely this consolation. Everything is an opportunity for practice and commiseration, for comfort in its lovely etymological origin – common strength.

Thus, the secret of interpretive work is that this impermanent dependent co-arising is full of relations, full of often hidden or occluded voices and ancestries, mixed blood lines, secrets. It is full precisely of the voices and images and ideas and lingerings of the quick and the dead.

### Opening the Mouths of the Dead

In *Lament of the Dead* (Hillman & Shamdasani 2013), James Hillman repeatedly introduces a stunning image to help formulate his experience of first opening Carl Jung's then-recently published *Red Book* (1999): “I was reading about this practice that the ancient Egyptians had of opening the mouth of the dead. I think we don't do that with our hands” (p. 1). Sonu Shamdasani soon elaborates:

It is the ancestors. It is the dead. This is no mere metaphor. This is no cipher for the unconscious or something like that. When [Jung] talks about the dead he means the dead. And they're present in images. They still live on. (p. 2)

This is an ecological as well as a mytho-poetic presumption, and it has some affinity to threads of Buddhist thought as well. It is a presumption that “transforms the world and its beings into a most extraordinary vision” (Tsong-kha-pa, 2005, p. 125):

The land of the dead is the country of ancestors, and the images who walk in on us are our ancestors. If not literally the blood and genes from whom we descend, then they are the historical progenitors. (Hillman, 1996, p. 60)

Likewise, the linguistic progenitors hidden in words (like “comfort”). And the earthly progenitors hidden in the plain sight of the animal body's tracing of places and footfalls. The dogs sniffing old piss trails as the snow melts.

“Transforming according to circumstances, meet all beings as your ancestors” (Hongzhi Zhengjue [1091-1157 CE], 1991, p. 43; see Jardine, 2016, pp. 75-78)

We “are always already everywhere inhabited” (Smith 2006, p. xxiv). The ancestors, our *relations*, human and other-wise, are always already amongst us and we amongst them, in the most ordinary of objects or words or images, in the texts, in the trees, in the dreamstates, in the gestures, even in the flesh-ache of muscle-born dry wood for winter and the panicky bugs that scurry over it. Or in the distant, unwarranted and perhaps inevitable fear for one’s child, care sometimes gone amuck, monkey-mind in the midst of impermanence.

And this is just as true of ravens nearby and long since disappeared, of trees long gone to soils, of the outbreath of this forest, here, now, around me, inhaled under the sun’s slow returning.

### Sunflowers and Five Red Hens

Every road leads to an end  
 Your apparition passes through me in the willows  
 Five red hens – you’ll never see us again.  
 Sufjan Stevens (2015), from “Death with Dignity”

A delicate Helado Negro remix of “Death with Dignity,” these shreds and patches have the poignant, half-there quality of going through the possessions of someone dear who has died. Its incompleteness, then, is as apt a reflection of grieving as you could hope for. (Harris, 2018, p. 107)

Pennants. #239, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor West, Trueman House,  
 1947. The still,  
 Colourless memory of a colourful past  
 Still  
 Embedded with pins. (adapted from Moules, 2017, p. 3)

Five red hens whose saturation of color is palpable in those lines that took my breath away, even though I don’t quite know what it means:

We are drawn into an event . . . and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to [now] believe. (Gadamer, 1989 p. 490)

But I do know *how* it means. Its specificity holds and intensifies and “breaks forth as if from a center” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 458). Images are sites of power and prickle, pins that beckon attention and ask something of us – to take good care of them. They *are* incomplete, and an elegant interpretation of them leaves them as they *are*, deepening the saturation of the colours.

I didn’t know John Moules well. Only a wee bit. Only once upon a time sat in his backyard, with seven-foot –were they eight-foot? 10? 20? -- sunflowers laced to the garage and singing in the full-bore summer light, all heads, ours too, turned in phototropic obedience, and all this burned into memory traces whose graces come and go. We are all sat still. Still there. Motionless.

And he came to see my garden and it now seems like a near-mythic event, his frail gait and determination under ravens overhead soaring on summer thermals, black oily wings glinting and curving in thin air.

All things teach as they alight and gurr-gurr and click and burble and yellow-eye the compost.

We check the greenhouse and check the smell of the tomato leaves. That smell like nothing else. Furry vines thick with the perfume of red pulses. Grieving can be just this acrid sweet:

Silhouette of the cedar

What is that song you sing for the dead? (Stevens, 2015, n.p.)

I grew up around cedar trees and there aren't any hereabouts. They haunt me still from little boy days near Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment, where they clung to limestone edges and aged in place for centuries. As did I, feeling my age as this image flits by and flirts and teases.

Red hens, cedars, ravens, sunflowers, all new and fresh. There is some relief to be had in feeling already somewhat outlived. Of dropping the heavy weight of feeling necessary to the well-being of the world.

“A radical challenge to thought.” It is an escape from something.

### **Held Captive and Coming To**

Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something [Latin *fugere*] that had deceived us and held us captive. Thus, insight always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side of what we called experience in the proper sense. Insight is something we come to. It . . . is ultimately part of [our human vocation] –i.e., to be discerning and insightful. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 356)

[Insight is] is not [simply about] this or that particular thing [but] insight into the limitations of humanity. Thus, experience is the experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart. The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion. (Gadamer 1989, p. 357)

We are reifying beings and such reification belies impermanence and such belying of impermanence leaves us haunted but not necessarily insightful. Images can spellbind as much as they can release us into the tumult of things. Remaining fugitive is the art of interpretation.

Martin Heidegger's *unheimlichkeit*, “un-home-like-ness,” (1962, p. 233) sensing the uncanny haunt of things under the icy surface calm, just looked up in an old hardcover bought in 1971, held together with tape, aging in place on the shelf, still with the notes from a conversation with Gadamer from 1976 scrawled inside the cover, with his note back to his own teacher:

Care [German *Sorge*, root of “sorrow”] is internal to Being-in-the-world rather than its dominating father. (see Jardine, 2015)

It is sometimes true that the dead are more amongst us when they are no longer alive, that they are “with” us in more lively and haunting ways in their death than in their living.

Back and forth, between memory  
 Love, anger,  
 Disappointment, reality  
 Romance, gratitude, admiration, regret. (adapted from Moules, 2017, p. 2)

Every death bursts forth as if from a center. Their living, in death, gets tossed up into thin air and scattered outwards, an energy out beyond the thicknesses of a body, lying, stilled. It is getting these grave gravities back in motion again, back “in play” (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 101-109), that is the work of undergoing grief – Aristotle’s *energia*, that very thing that grief can drain faster than it fills up, “aliveness.”

### “The Claim”

After this recognition – the image as ancestor – there is the experience of the *claim* that images make upon me.

...

We do not make them up, so we do not make up our response to them but are ‘taught’ this response by them.

...

Our way . . . does not interpret the image but talks with it. It does not ask what the images means but what it wants.

...

How do we know whether they mean well with us or would possess us?  
 (Hillman, 1996, pp. 60, 61, 93, 75)

### “Shifted Toward a Rustling”

Something outside of the funeral hall window caught my attention and my gaze shifted toward a rustling in the bushes. Coyote. It was one of those bone chilling winters, a harsh climate, that provided comfort to me in its barren, hollow form. Yet still, there was movement. (Beamer, 2017, p. 1)

Still. There was movement, animation in a barren, hollow form. Back and forth. Between. “*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*” (Gadamer 1989, p. 295). It is the fugitive spot where we can sense, in the smallest or largest of events, that “something is going on, (*im Spiele ist*), something is happening (*sich abspielt*)” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 104), or as the German etymology betrays, *something is at play* (German *Spiel*).

But watch out. Hiding here, too, is a Yiddish-English usage of a tricky tale meant to deceive or persuade or to allow the teller to escape unharmed or elude capture. Thus summoning pitchman Hermes all over again and Coyote's trickiness.

In taking up the trick, walking through the open gate, then, we must remain alert and not just fall for it.

The wound of grief is thus a locale of the unexpected, rustling arrival of "something outside":

*Perception of opportunities requires a sensitivity given through one's own wounds.* Here, weakness provides the kind of hermetic, secret perception critical for adaptation to situations. The weak place serves to open us to what is in the air. We feel through our pores which way the wind blows. We turn with the wind; trimmers. An opportunity requires. . . a sense. . . which reveals the *daimon* of a situation. The *daimon* of a place in antiquity supposedly revealed what the place was good for, its special quality and dangers. The *daimon* was thought to be a *familiaris* of the place. To know a situation, one needs to sense what lurks in it. (Hillman, 2013, pp. 101-102)

Coyote is just such a familiar figure, and it is how Hermes might be cast as well, both like the sweep of a black cat on a witch's broom. Familiars. The bush-rustling portend of *energia*, aliveness. Coyote's trick, Hermes' opening of the gate, can bring hope and a sense of futurity, opportunity out beyond grief and its thickness and gravity and haltedness. Opportunity, portals, pores, openings, wounds. A hint, then, of *aletheia* (see Moules, 2016). Sensing what lurks. Pins and hens and sunflowers turn to face me. What do you want? What shall I do that is proper to this turning?

Imagine. Death's swerving halt sets things in motion. Its arrival is not adequately understood as simply the causal outcome of previous events or circumstances. Instead, it *happens* and its happenstance cascades out into the future and back into previous events deemed finished and over with. In this sense, it makes sense, but does not make enough sense to speak of the "cause of death." Death enlivens – memory, presumption, desire, hope, imagination, expectation, regret, anger, and grief, yes grief. Precisely its eventful finality makes it an unfinished swerve, back and forth, and sidelong into surroundings, multiple.

Summoned "to see with fresh eyes" (Gadamer, 1989, p.16)

It is full of "lightning flashes" (Calvino, 1988, p. 48)

The suddenly found object, the suddenly arisen smell or word or little totem having been left behind here on a table, sometimes unbearably and unexplicably full of significance, reminder, or portend. The ghost of a forgotten habit run into over coffee spilled in the morning. "I see dead people" in the quickening light glanced in the window. Even those words about fresh eyes are precisely such, remembered here, memorably risen up seemingly of their own volition.

Italo Calvino (1988) speaks of "quickness" in this light. Things *happen* and no amount of well-wrought themes or rules or the like can outrun the fact that "the rule does not comprehend it"

(Gadamer, 1989, p. 39) – the event outruns and such outrunning keeps the rule alive and alert and in play. It becomes a live-wire that must prove itself again and again in the face of events.

*Oddly*, so oddly, death in the experience of the living as an experience of “lightness” (Calvino, 1988) and “quickenings” (see Jardine, 2015a, p. 109-122). And this just as the very opposite also occurs, where the live body, in death, becomes a thick thing in an instant and how the dead body seems to weigh so much more than one that is alive.

### **“Afflicted by Openness”**

Opportunities are not plain, clean gifts; they trail dark and chaotic attachments to their unknown backgrounds, luring us further. One insight leads to another; one invention suggests another variation; more and more seems to press through the hole, and more and more we find ourselves drawn out into a chaos of possibilities. (Hillman, 2013, p. 94)

We can become “afflicted by openness” (Hillman, 2013, p. 113) as those grieving know full well. What might have portended quickness and enlivening can shift: “wingedness [can] become mere haste” (p. 51) or the repeated, even relentless rush of moments, swerves, waves of memory and gut that simply push and stab. Those doing hermeneutic work understand this full well, too. Suddenly, unexpectedly, “everything points to some other thing. Nothing comes forward just in the one meaning that is offered to us” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 131).

We can be “outplayed” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 106). Or, perhaps worse “through his[her] own wounds, [“wound” as locale of vulnerability, pain, sensitivity; “wound” as hole or portal, Latin *porta*, root of opportunity] may feed others, but may himself [herself] be drained thereby” (Hillman, 2013, pp. 19-20). In grief, we can end up spent, drained whilst all the while there is the buzzing of event. There are those times when the memory of the dead starts to flit and cascade and buzz and tremble and skitter and scatter and it won’t stop. It won’t stop.

This is so much like those first becoming involved in interpretive work. “How do I get it to stop?”

“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).

### **“The Green Signals”**

How their deaths quicken the air around them, stipple their bodies with a light like the green signals trees send out before their leaves appear. (Wallace, 1987, p. 40)

What writers have is a license and also the freedom to sit -- to sit, clench their fists, and make themselves be excruciatingly aware of the stuff that we’re mostly aware of only on a certain level. And that if the writer does his job right, what he basically does is remind the reader of how smart the reader is. [It] is to wake the reader up to stuff that the reader’s been aware of all the time. (Wallace, with Lipsky, 2010, p. 41)

This is such a lovely hint at the nature of interpretive work when it works. It reads like something I knew all along but had forgotten, something that allows us “to recognize ourselves in the mess of the world as having been engaged and always being engaged” (Hillman, 1996, p. 49). Even if we leave such engagement undecoded, it increases the richness of the colours of red hens.

There is a passage from the first volume of Tsong-kha-pa’s *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (2000, p. 111) that I find myself returning to: “I compose this in order to condition my own mind.”

If I may be so bold, I compose this, I write, in order to compose myself, in order to gain some fleet and failing composure in the face of the onrush of things. Writing, when it works, does not despoil the richness and saturation of the colours. Paying proper attention to experience breaks through the illusion of permanence. It can deepen the colours and can expand me beyond my own means of consolation: “By making the object of meditation extensive [you] expand your [own] mind” (Tsong-kha-pa, 2002, p. 63).

### Freedom

The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom, which finds its light, identity and dignity in those few brief moments when one’s lived burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things. (Smith, 1999, p. 29)

And then, from the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, from Tsong-kha-pa’s *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*:

Buddhapalita’s *Commentary on [Nagarjuna’s] “Fundamental Treatise”* says:

What is the purpose of teaching dependent-arising? The master Nagarjuna . . . saw that living beings are beset by various sufferings and assumed the task of teaching the reality of things . . . *so that they might be free*. [my emphasis] What is the reality of things? It is the absence of essence. Unskilled persons . . . conceive of an essence in things [something fixed and final and permanent] and then generate attachment and hostility with regard to them. (Tsong-kha-pa, 2002, p. 210)

And from Longchenpa’s *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind* (2017, p. 47): “Through wisdom, freedom is achieved.”

But it is not just my freedom that is frailty and momentarily won. Interpretation *frees its object of investigation to be what it is* – dependently co-arising, rather than caught in the binds of grief and other afflictions that might reify.

It lets John Moules catch the thermals and fly up above the sunflowers even as my chest heaves at the thought.



Away you go, then, so we can console ourselves. So that you can remain with us beyond these dead and silent remains.

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