# WHY ARE WE READING THIS?
# HERMENEUTIC INQUIRY INTO THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING (WITH) LITERATURE

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**Dedication**

To my family:

Amie, for your partnership in this life.

I am inspired by your newfound passion and vibrancy as a mother.

When I started this endeavor, we were kids. And now we have two of our own.

Sybil and Phoebe, for your beautiful vitality. You are a wellspring.

Mom and Dad, for the childhood you gave me, your quiet wisdom, and constant love.

I draw strength from you all.

**Abstract**

Philosophical hermeneutics has much to offer the high school English teacher, for it fundamentally reorients our understanding of what it means to interpret – or teach (with) – literature. When we adopt a hermeneutic stance, we begin to see literature as a formative space. It is in this space, I contend, that we may begin to reorient attitudes towards what and why we read. The following research, therefore, is my attempt to come to know the hermeneutic tradition, and the manner in which its principles and practices have been taken up by scholars in the various fields of literary cognitivism, arts-based pedagogy, and curriculum studies. In this way, I endeavor to better understand the manner in which we think about teaching literature in schools. Ultimately, I examine what a hermeneutic ethos looks like within the context of a literature classroom and how it might inform a coherent approach to teaching (with) literature.

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I must also thank my fellow hermeneut, reader, and traveller in this endeavor, Josh Markle. I greatly value the countless conversations we have shared over morning coffees and backyard libations. My growth as a thinker and writer over the past three years is due in large part to our shared and ongoing dialogue.

Finally, I must thank my students, those who read and dwelt within my classroom, for their refusal to stop asking, "*Why?*"

## Table of Contents

Dedication ..... iii

Abstract ..... iv

Acknowledgements ..... v

Table of Contents ..... vi

Prologue ..... 1

Chapter 1: Why Are We Reading This? ..... 5

Current Failings in the Literature Classroom ..... 8

Why (an Allegiance to) Critical Theory Cannot Save Us ..... 10

Fostering a Tolerance for Ambiguity: Hermeneutics and Literary Space ..... 12

Chapter 2: Writing-as-Inquiry ..... 18

Chapter 3: Learning to Inhabit Literature Hermeneutically ..... 24

Gadamer's Insistence on Prejudice as a Condition of Understanding ..... 26

Understanding as a Fusion of Horizons ..... 31

The Ontological Dimension: Heidegger's Being-in-the-World ..... 34

Application as an Inherent Element of Hermeneutic Understanding ..... 37

Becoming Experienced: *Erfahrung* ..... 41

Chapter 4: Moments to Interrogate Hermeneutically ..... 46

His Father was a Glove-maker ..... 47

Though This Be Madness, Yet There is Method In't ..... 60

Step one: Systematic improvement and understanding ourselves by analogy ..... 60

Step two: What do we want students to learn? ..... 65

Wayfinding ..... 71

Cultivating an Openness to New Experience ..... 78

Chapter 5: Implications for Reading and Teaching Practices ..... 84

Inheriting Incoherence: Re-entering the Classroom ..... 85

The World of Practice ..... 87

References ..... 90

## Prologue

> *The remnants of past life – what is left of buildings, tools, the contents of graves – are weather-beaten by the storms of time that have swept over them, whereas a written tradition, once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. In it time and space seem to be superseded. People who can read what has been handed down in writing produce and achieve the sheer presence of the past.*
>
> – Gadamer, 2013, p. 163
>
> *[Narratives] become a quantum crucible to hold and study lives and human experience.*
>
> – Fowler, 2018, pp. 1-2

My two-year old daughter is growing accustomed to my once-a-week overnight absence, as I head east on Highway 3 every Wednesday to observe the pre-service teachers assigned to me this term. I am not far removed from the classroom myself, having just been seconded to this supervisory position at the start of the school year. Nevertheless, in my new role sitting at the back of *these* classrooms, I can't help feeling like poor Ebenezer Scrooge – early in his ghostly sojourn – looking on in anguish at his youth. In these pre-service teachers, I regularly see versions of my younger self, the same anxiety around lesson components, the same bewilderment over what exactly to care about *most*, when being observed.

> *I heard someone once say that those*
> *who have chosen this profession,*
> *those whose feet beat a path around*
> *desks and whose fingers grip chalk,*
> *will be faced with - on average -*
> *twenty-five-hundred decisions each day.*
> *How do you track a thing like that?*
> *It explains why I can't remember my own name*
> *by the time the last ringing bell releases us.*

The checklist they used, when observing teachers in my division, was printed on yellow paper. Nine research-based high-yield instructional strategies, each with its own little checkbox floating alongside in the margin. Those observing would watch, pen poised, sharply waiting for evidence of my having integrated at least one of these nine strategies into my lesson. Their inclusion was paramount. Once checked off on the yellow form, all parties could rest easy. Research-based strategies had informed my planning and, most importantly of all, we all spoke the same edu-language. We were deemed "*consciously* competent," able to speak – as all professionals *should* – to the integration of the most current and up-to-date research-informed "tools of the trade." Comparisons between our work and that of the medical field frequently blurred with sports analogies, and the importance of holding each other accountable for constant improvement.

> *But usually my mind whirs up to speed*
> *mimicking the vibrations of the hard drive*
> *in my school-issued laptop, school-issued brain.*
> *In any case, I consider myself lucky if I know,*
> *or at least would bet, that these kids under my nose, who,*
> *let's face it, are only a sneeze away from adult-sized days,*
> *are a little less scared or complacent than when they*
> *shuffled up from the basement, this a.m.*

"Why are we reading this?" It is a question that lives at the heart of my experience as an English teacher, as someone tasked with regularly leading young people into and through a wide array of narratives. For the better part of the last decade, I have taught in an English Language Arts classroom and, as I have developed and redrawn my own strategies and approaches to teaching (with) literature, I have continually struggled to answer this question.

Inspired by a photograph of Earth taken from the Voyager I space probe on February 14th, 1990, noted author and astronomer Sagan (1994) wrote in *Pale Blue Dot*, "The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines…, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam" (p. 6). I often show this photograph to my students in an effort to illustrate what, to me, is one of the most important roles of reading narratives in the classroom: to resist parochial thinking, and to reinforce the fact that we share this tiny fragile island with other human beings. The image is profound, and often elicits a disquiet within my students, as they ponder, for a moment, the delicate and overwhelmingly isolated nature of our world, as seen from six billion kilometers away. It is a strategy I have used in the past, when, stymied by student protests regarding assigned reading material, I fumble for a response as to the importance of literature and why we read what we read, or why we read anything at all.

In recent years, I've learned to see this moment – the moment wherein a student challenges the very idea of reading a particular text – as a sure and positive sign of vitality. They want an answer. Why this? Why now? Far worse is the moment when students, so asphyxiated by their years of schooling and mangled experiences in the "language arts," complacently open their books without a thought as to why indeed we might be reading this, now, together.

These questions, and how we might respond, however, are not found on the forms and paperwork we fill out as teachers and teacher-supervisors. They exist instead – if at all – on the margins of those "debriefing" conversations. Rather than address that one screaming question, at the centre of my discipline, I was encouraged to record a video of

myself performi-teaching. Awareness of voice modulation and charting the number of glances to the left of the room, as opposed to right, would help me improve *my craft*. "What would the students think," I'd ask, "of being recorded by an eye and an ear in the shiny device at the back of the room, as they tentatively stepped out, into foreign territory, to grapple with new ideas in the pages we were reading?"

> *And on the drive home,*
> *whether carpooling, or alone,*
> *I shed the clothes, the mask, and all the*
> *trappings of the uniform*
> *that identify me as "Mister."*
> *I leave behind the borrowed demeanour*
> *and the jabber and yammer of the vocation;*
> *they rattle behind me like so many tin cans tied*
> *with string to mark some memorable occasion.*
> *Most nights settle slowly around us, with*
> *looming mountains of books and towers of paper –*
> *though, to be fair, most of those wait for later.*
> *Our empty dinner plates are usually scattered and*
> *the radio's soft din serves as company or*
> *conversation since we both are hunched down,*
> *around what will serve as tomorrow's*
> *educational solicitations.*
>
> *When it's finally time to rest our eyes*
> *and draw blinds, when our apartment is*
> *shut down and quiet for the duration of a*
> *muted nighttime, she breathes softly beside me,*
> *reassurance manifested bodily, that tomorrow*
> *hasn't come just yet and for now,*
> *we can just lie here, free from the duties that*
> *tomorrow's sun will bring,*
> *as we are fumbling to remember*
> *how to call ourselves "teacher" all over again.*

## Chapter 1: Why Are We Reading This?

I recently received a phone call from a concerned mother. Her daughter is a student in my English 20 class who, a few short days into the course, had confided to her mother that she was troubled by the novel we were reading together in class. I had chosen to begin the semester with a study of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Though I had never before taught (with) the novel, I had read it a number of years ago and knew it to be a powerful story that explored difficult themes in language highly accessible to a high school audience. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, I knew that there would be an opportunity later in the semester to take students to see the world premiere of a stage adaptation of the novel put on by Theatre Calgary. Knowing that I would have students in the class who rarely (if ever) read fiction on their own, I thought it important to seize the opportunity to read a novel together as a class that would then be brought to life on stage for us to watch and hear. As a child, I had the opportunity to see live theatre somewhat regularly and was eager for my students — many of whom had grown up in a small, relatively remote rural centre — to experience the immersive nature of storytelling in a way that live theatre is particularly good at conveying. Because the date of the production was a mere month into the semester, and because I wanted my students to understand the novel as a whole prior to seeing the play, I adopted Westbrook's (2013) whole class approach to reading, "as a hermeneutical endeavour" (p. 42). In her study, she reports that cooperating teachers "read whole complex

narratives" with their students and designed their approach to teaching literature according to principles of intertextuality and hermeneutics (p. 42).[1]

In a similar manner, then, we embarked on a rapid reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and paused only periodically to clarify any misunderstanding, discuss the development of the narrative in small groups, and occasionally identify emergent themes. I also set aside some time for students to engage with shorter whole texts that resonated with the novel in an effort to incorporate and reap the benefits of the intertextuality Westbrook (2013) espouses (p. 45).

But then the phone call came. The beginning of what I had thought was a well-designed and compelling novel study was disrupted by a simple and fundamental question asked of this mother, by her daughter: *Why are we reading this?* It became clear over the course of the conversation that my student was troubled by a number of the events in the novel, which, I readily acknowledge — as does Hosseini — are indeed profoundly troubling. What I had neglected to adequately address with the class prior to reading the novel was *why* we read literature at all, particularly of this nature. Without a worthwhile answer to her question, my student was simply baffled as to why I would eagerly lead them into a text that contains explicit scenes of misogyny, violent marital abuse, crippling depression, and political corruption. What my student was asking of her mother — and, by extension, what her mother was asking of me — was *why* we should

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[1] Westbrook's (2013) model is informed by the hermeneutics of Gadamer (1989/2013) and Ricoeur (1991), and she cites both in the explanation of her experimental design (p. 43). Specifically, she highlights the hermeneutic circle and Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," achieved "through a dialectical question and answer between text and reader" (p. 43). From Ricoeur, she adds the notion of reading as *reflexive*, "involving first a loss of self and then an alteration through the process, a shift in self-perception" (p. 43).

read any fiction at all, especially fiction that unsettles us or disrupts our understanding of the world. And I realized that this question is truly what has been at the heart of each of my English literature courses in the eight years I have been teaching. It is a question I have danced around, answering only peripherally, or with unsatisfying and unconvincing aphorisms, mostly to do with the intrinsic — self-evident? — value of experiencing a part of the world through someone else's eyes.

In his book, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, Landy (2012a), relates a similar tale about one of his own students who, when asked what she thought of one of his favourite novels (*Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison), replied that it was "pretty good" but that Morrison "could have gotten to the point a bit quicker" (p. 3). This response strikes Landy (2012b) as clear evidence of the fact that we have "systematically — albeit unwittingly — engaged on a long-term campaign of misinformation, relentlessly persuading would-be readers that fictions are designed to give them useful advice" (p. 170). Landy's statement resonates powerfully within me, because, for the last eight years, I have taught in an English Language Arts classroom and, as I have developed, rewritten, thrown out, and redrawn my own strategies and approaches to teaching (with) literature, I have continually struggled to succinctly articulate to students, parents, administrators, and other stakeholders the value and purpose of reading literature in school, particularly literature that is not easily digestible; literature that challenges and disrupts. Exasperatingly, it is the most simple and fundamental questions, which lie at the heart of my discipline, that defy straightforward answers: Why are we reading this? What is the purpose of literature? Wherein lies its value? What can literature offer with regard

to the world and our living in it? And furthermore, how ought literature be studied? How ought it be handled in a classroom?

**Current Failings in the Literature Classroom**

Gibson (2007) argues that our attempts to articulate a theory of literary cognitivism – an ancient project dating back to Plato and Aristotle – are symptomatic of our broader struggle to understand the nature of literature itself (p. 1). We are keenly aware, argues Gibson (2007), of the need to satisfactorily explain why it is that we continue to turn

> to literature with the expectation of having our understanding of the world refined, augmented, even shocked; to give support to the perhaps vague but nonetheless pervasive belief that in literary experience we often come to know ourselves and our world better. (p. 1)

Unsurprisingly, today's literature classroom is very much implicated in this philosophical dilemma; however, at its heart lies a troubling tangle of diverging theoretical impulses. And while working out a satisfactory theory of literary cognitivism likely lies beyond the scope of most high school courses, the literature classroom *is* most assuredly suffering from of a lack of theoretical understanding. Milner and Milner (2002) identify a division "that has been drawn and redrawn for decades between classrooms that were text-centered and those that were reader-centered" (p. 101). The central question facing a new teacher of literature, they suggest, is whether to "focus on exploring the text in all of its historical, biographical, cultural, psychological, thematic, and formal richness or on exploring students' responses to the text in all of the historical, biographical, social, and cultural richness of those students" (p. 101). Indeed, one need

only briefly peel back the lid[2] of a literature classroom to see students engaged in a bewildering mish-mash of activities that arise from very different theoretical understandings of the purpose of literature (ranging from highly personalized reader-response models, to essentialist attempts to unearth stable truths buried within a text's pages). Sumara (2002) paints an even less optimistic picture, and relates his concern that

> public schools are not very interested in helping young people develop the sorts of interpretation practices that I think are important. In schools, studying literature continues to mean reading a lot of it rather quickly and being able to identify literary devices and write critical essays. (p. 157)

In a similar vein, Landy (2012b) states categorically that the ways in which we *currently* teach literature in high schools have real and damaging effects not just on the potential for fiction to matter, but on the lives of readers themselves:

> it is bad…for (potential) readers [to be] deprived of the *real* reward on offer from sustained engagement with substantial works of fiction. They may indeed be positively *harmed* as a result of reading for the 'message.' Telling readers to mine fictions for messages is a surefire way to put their actual benefits out of reach. (pp. 181-182, emphasis in original)[3]

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[2] This idea that we might peel back the lid of a literature classroom is suggestive of the hermeneutic concept of *aletheia,* which "remembers and unconceals what was forgotten" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 3). Moules et al. (2015) explain that hermeneutics "calls forth the ordinary and makes it stand out. In this standing out, however, it does not stand alone, but stands with its history, legacies, and relationships, acknowledging that there are both hidden and apparent traces that constitute and constantly change how something comes to exist" (p. 4). In a sense, my work begins here; in peeling back the lid of the literature classroom, I hope to make visible the traditionary and "hidden traces" that inform our practice of teaching (with) literature in schools.

[3] As with Sumara, Landy bespeaks hermeneutic principles in his thinking here, particularly the Heideggerian or ontological dimension of hermeneutics.

Unfortunately, far too frequently one will observe teachers and students engaged in a study of literature without ever really having reflected on the nature of literature itself – such was my realization with Hosseini's novel in my own classroom. Such a classroom, I believe, is fundamentally confused, for it hasn't worked out the purpose of literature, how it should be handled, or taught. Troublingly, such classrooms – in their theoretical incoherency – are perhaps also guilty of contributing to the increasing endangerment of sophisticated readers. Landy (2013) argues that literary texts "matter tremendously, but only if they are read and indeed only if they are read in a certain way" (p. 49). They matter, he argues, "only if the right kind of reader continues to exist. And that's what has started to be in serious doubt, as the right kind of reader hovers…on the very verge of extinction" (p. 49). The stakes, then, are high. A satisfying approach to teaching (with) literature must not only rescue the study of literature itself, but also work to cultivate readers who will engage with literature in a sustainable way.

**Why (an Allegiance to) Critical Theory Cannot Save Us**

> *Words are our tools for thinking, and the invasion of 'theory' into all of them reduces the variety of those tools, depleting our resources for thinking.*
>
> – Thomas, 2007, p. 150

Though, in an effort to provide some clarity, we may feel inclined to identify and promote a singular, comprehensive theory of literature or literary theory for the classroom, this would be an ill-advised approach. Jardine (1998) identifies this desire for clarity as a problematic, yet common feature of educational theory and practice, which has tended towards "specification, univocity, clarification, and, essentially, the overcoming of ambiguity" (p. 10). This impulse, according to Jardine (1998) exists not as an explicit requirement of educational theory, but "an unvoiced presumption" that life is

> essentially unambiguous, clear and distinct – a possible *object* of research which can be disassembled and clarified, within statistically documentable parameters, piece by relentless piece – and finding it ambiguous indicates a problem that simply has not yet been fully addressed, fully researched, and fully specified in all its inherent clarity. (p. 10, emphasis in original)

Such a presumption is self-evidently naïve for Jardine (1998), and therefore constitutes an inexcusably reductive approach. Any educational inquiry, then, that aims to produce a singular, comprehensive theory in the name of clarity is surely suspect, and will likely constitute an overly simplistic attempt, ultimately destined to become just "one more theory to be dumped on the pile with others" (Jardine, 1998, p. 12).

Landy (2012a) too, warns against the adoption of any universal claims or theories that would account for the value or purpose of *all* literature — for specific theories attend to the nature of certain texts better than others (p. 6). Furthermore, argues Landy (2007), we should be wary of aligning ourselves too enthusiastically with one particular literary or critical theory, lest we reduce all further textual analysis to a set of empty exercises – a natural consequence of knowing "in advance what conclusions are going to be drawn from a given analysis" (p. 409).[4] Such allegiance to a particular theory, argues Landy (2007), actually "makes literature less interesting, not more" (p. 409) – a particular problem if we are to foster a population of intelligent and enthusiastic readers.

In examining the realm of education more generally, Thomas (2007) argues that the concept of "theory" in educational research has become a *Hydra* (p. 143). He suggests

[4] Landy presents a series of compelling arguments regarding the danger and misguidedness of high critical theory in his (2007) paper, "Philosophy to the Rescue."

that educators' tendency to classify a great many modes of thinking and reasoning as "theory" is due to the term's "epistemological allure: theory has the Midas touch" (p. 143). This is highly problematic for Thomas (2007), who suggests that "overuse of 'theory' dilutes and homogenizes the way that inquiry is thought about, discussed and undertaken. Nuances are steamrollered, subtleties flattened, richnesses attenuated" (p. 148). To help make his case, Thomas (2007) compiles a table of distinctly unique thinking constructs, drawing distinctions between discrete Greek philosophical concepts including: *aesthesis* (perception), *apodeixis* (demonstration), *doxa* (common opinion), *eikon* (changing likeness), *eikos* (what is probable), *epagôgê* (induction), *epistêmê* (knowledge), *heuriskein* (to discover), among others (pp. 149-150). If every endeavor we conduct in the name of educational research collapses into a proposed "theory," argues Thomas (2007), "there is an impoverishment brought to the exercise of inquiry" (p. 147). Therefore, adherence to a singular theory is not the way forward; not only because of the complexity and multiplicity of texts, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because of the complexity and multiplicity of classrooms and the lives of readers (and researchers) therein.

**Fostering a Tolerance for Ambiguity: Hermeneutics and Literary Space**

> *Hermeneutics is not a theory of knowledge but the art of life and death, and it ranges over the length and breadth and depth of life*.
>
> – Caputo, 2015, p. xiii

If the search for a singular theory of literature is not the way forward, how then might we proceed? Jardine (1998) points us towards the phenomenologists and their "peculiar tolerance for… ambiguity" (p. 11). Rather than attempting to simplify and clarify, phenomenologists move in the opposite direction, attempting "to voice the

contours of life as it is actually lived" (Jardine, 1998, p. 11). Though invoking phenomenology necessarily implicates the foundational work of Edmund Husserl, here Jardine is referring more directly to the later work of phenomenological hermeneutics associated with Husserl's successors – most notably Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur – for whom phenomenology becomes "a radically interpretive enterprise" (Porter & Robinson, 2011, pp. 56, 60). It is Heidegger who first reorients Husserl's phenomenology by insisting upon the ontological dimension of understanding. For Heidegger,

> we cannot describe understanding like a tool to be used or a specific act or technique to be played out, for it is in and through understanding that we exist. Moreover, to describe understanding we cannot begin with a method, theory of knowledge, analysis of consciousness, or even something we might first associate with language. Rather, we must begin with a disclosure of being. (Porter & Robinson, 2011, pp. 67-68)

Thus, instead of seeking to discover or articulate a particular *method* of interpretation, hermeneutics investigates the nature of the world as it is, as it impresses itself upon us, as uniquely positioned thinking agents. Jardine (1998) asserts that, if we are to think hermeneutically, we must make every effort to "document our experience-of-the-world just as it gives itself to be, without...judging that experience in light of some fantastic and seductive paradigm of clarity" (p. 22).[5] Hermeneutics, then, presents a paradigmatic shift, for it is not "just one more framework or model or method for understanding the world that can be listed alongside a plethora of other approaches" (Jardine, 1998, p. 19). Rather,

[5] Caputo (2015) explains that, "Hermeneutics does not shy away from the difficulty of life but summons the courage to deal with life in all its ambiguity" (p. xiii).

it fundamentally reorients our understanding of what it means to interpret – or teach (with) – literature, for, as Jardine (1998) declares, "we don't require a method to achieve a relationship to and understanding of life – we *are* alive *even if* this life is more confusing, joyous, and difficult than our methods can tolerate" (p. 23, emphasis in original). It seems our energies – as both readers and teachers of literature – would be much better spent cultivating an attentive and hermeneutic disposition than seeking out external theories or methods that attempt to clarify our practice.

Interestingly, in his essay "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes," Milan Kundera (2003) takes issue with the phenomenologists – notably Husserl and Heidegger – for their failure to acknowledge the novel (a wholly European tradition and art form, according to Kundera) as a space wherein the great existential themes of their respective philosophical treatises had already been "unveiled, displayed, [and] illuminated" for the last four hundred years (p. 5). For Kundera (2003), the novel "in its own way, through its own logic, [has] discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one" (p. 5). Indeed, it is no surprise that the birth of the novel quite naturally coincides with the emergence of modernity, for:

> as God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. (Kundera, 2003, p. 6)

For Kundera (2003) then, the novel (a manifestation of a wholly modern artistic and intellectual impulse) *encourages* hermeneutic interpretation, for it provides a very real landscape wherein we might interpret, ponder, and question "the world of life" (p. 5). Consequently, the wisdom of the novel is a "wisdom of uncertainty" which is precisely what makes it so difficult to accept (p. 7). By means of explanation, Kundera (2003) despairingly concludes:

> The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: "Things are not as simple as you think." That is the novel's eternal truth, but it grows steadily harder to hear amid the din of easy, quick answers that come faster than the question and block it off. (p. 18)

Even the novel, it seems – with its expansive potential for fostering a hermeneutic disposition and a tolerance for ambiguity – may cease to exist as a space for thoughtful reflection unless we eschew the search for a particular method or theory of instruction, and instead learn to inhabit its pages hermeneutically.

In their introduction to the subject, Porter and Robinson (2011) begin defining hermeneutics by what it is *not*. It is *not*, they argue, "a discipline in the typical sense" (p. 5). Unlike other critical theories or schools of thought, hermeneutics does not seek to "establish itself as a philosophical scheme or discipline on its own" (p. 5). Echoing the sentiments of Sumara (2002) and Landy (2007) with regard to the complicated nature of teaching (with) literature in the classroom, Porter and Robinson (2011) also acknowledge the deceptively difficult nature of understanding (and communicating to students) the nature of the relationships between reader, author, and text, especially when a temporal, cultural, linguistic, or other distance between these entities, must be overcome (p. 4).

Even when we do not encounter such a distance, however, we still experience "a sense of otherness or distance between ourselves and the text or other person" (p. 4). Thus, hermeneutics is particularly well suited for the literature classroom for it "thrives upon the inherent ambiguity and otherness that we face daily, and is used to foster a common accord when there is misunderstanding or lack of agreement" (p. 4). Philosophical hermeneutics, then, explores what it means, as thinking agents rooted within particular moments in space and time, to *interpret* the world around us. It has become "a general theory of understanding for all spheres of human awareness" (p. 5).

Importantly, hermeneutics does not assume the presence of a stable or fixed meaning within a text. Instead, it encourages a dialogic or "open-ended questioning and answering between the past and present, the text and interpreter, without aiming at a final or complete interpretation" (Porter & Robinson, p. 11). Additionally, rather than suggesting a particular lens through which to view or understand a text, hermeneutics investigates *how* we think and reflect; it is inquisitive and reflexive, rather than prescriptive (Porter & Robinson, p. 5). Hermeneutic reading, it would seem, has much to offer the high school English teacher, for when we adopt a hermeneutic stance towards literature, we begin to see literature as a *formative* space – to borrow Landy's (2012a) phrase. It is in this space, I contend, that we may begin to reorient attitudes towards what we read and why we read it. The purpose of the proposed study, therefore, is to conduct a thorough analysis of the hermeneutic tradition, and the manner in which its principles have been taken up by scholars in the various fields of literary cognitivism, arts-based pedagogy, and curriculum studies in an effort to better understand the manner in which we think about the purpose and value of literature. In this way, I hope to articulate what a

hermeneutic ethos might look like within the context of a literature classroom and how it might inform a coherent and vigorous approach to teaching (with) literature.

## Chapter 2: Writing-as-Inquiry

> *Writing is not merely a summarizing activity that occurs when all the thinking has been done. Instead, writing becomes a thinking practice in itself.*
>
> – Sumara, 2002, p. 67

In their discussion of the emergence of new forms of qualitative research, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) examine the influence of hermeneutics, which suggests that "no pristine interpretation exists – indeed, no methodology, social or educational theory, or discursive form can claim a privileged position that enables the production of authoritative knowledge" (p. 311). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) acknowledge this influence as well, for in their defense of *writing* as a method of inquiry, they argue:

> Qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak. They do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge. They can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it. (p. 961)

Such statements are encouraging – and well overdue – for, as Jardine (2006) argues in his scathing summation of traditional research paradigms, we have often found ourselves, as educational researchers, in absurd territory when it comes to understanding the nature of our relationship to a subject of study. Traditionally, in an effort to demonstrate an appropriate distance (social, emotional, or other) from that which we seek to interpret, we make every effort to "sever" any pre-existing connections we may have with our subject (p. 275). Jardine (2006) characterizes this approach to research as a sort of purification ritual (p. 275); it is as if our idiosyncrasies, experiences, the very existence of our

emotional selves – if not properly "bracketed off" – necessarily sully our subject and ultimately call into question our reliability, veracity, and trustworthiness as researchers (p. 275). It is this implicit denigration of subjectivity that Jardine (2006) finds so preposterous and limiting, for when we sever ourselves so distinctly from that which we study, "our connection…becomes gutted. We understand [our subject] 'from the neck up' and only within the bounds that our severing and isolating methodology allows" (p. 275). Consequently, argues Jardine (2006), as researchers, we become "anonymous, replaceable, controllable, predictable, method-wielder[s]" (p. 275). Hermeneutics helps reorient this paradigm, however, and encourages qualitative researchers to "build bridges between…one particular social circumstance and another" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 311). Hermeneutic research resists the "purification" impulse of which Jardine (2006) speaks, for rather than insisting upon a severed and ostensibly objective researcher, it instead acknowledges (and incorporates) the historically and culturally situated identity of the researcher as a part of the interpretive process.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) locate this hermeneutic contribution within the larger framework of postmodern critiques of qualitative research in which "the sacrosanctity of social science writing conventions has been challenged" (p. 962). Consequently, once-distinct categories of research methodologies have blurred significantly (p. 962). In considering the evolution of qualitative research, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) identify a proliferation of new "species" of practices in recent years, including "autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama, readers' theatre, writing stories, aphorisms, layered texts, conversations, epistles, [and] polyvocal texts," which the authors collectively dub "creative analytical processes" (p. 962). Rather than severing

themselves from that which they study, researchers employing creative analytical practices "learn about the topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures, metaphors, and writing formats (pp. 962-963).[6]

With regard to the notion of criteria, and the manner in which we should evaluate creative analytical inquiries, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) acknowledge the difficulty of such a process, and yet assert the importance of holding such inquiry methods to "high and difficult standards" (p. 964). Rather than relaxing the standards for such approaches, we actually make the process *more* rigorous by evaluating the research according to additional criteria including "aesthetic merit," "reflexivity," and "impact," in addition to more traditional considerations (p. 964). To illustrate, the authors provide a powerful metaphor: the move from "triangulation," a strategy to validate findings in traditional methodologies, to "crystallization":

> The central imaginary for 'validity' for postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose – not triangulation but rather crystallization. In

[6] The reflexivity implicit within the authors' description here, demonstrates the influence of philosophical hermeneutics, particularly with regard to Gadamer's (1989/2013) insistence on individual prejudice as a condition of understanding.

> CAP texts, we have moved from plane geometry to light theory, where light can be both waves and particles. (p. 963)

Such a reconceptualization of what it means to research is, in part, a deconstruction of the concept of *method* (p. 967). And it is vital, contend Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), that we "interrogate whatever limits we have imposed on the concept of method lest we diminish its possibilities in knowledge production" (p. 967). Thus, when Richardson and St. Pierre argue "writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery" (p. 967, emphasis in original), they are simultaneously challenging and exploring what it means to research qualitatively in a postmodern landscape.

My primary purpose in the proposed thesis is to examine the hermeneutic tradition and, in doing so try to understand its potential for informing how we read and inhabit literature. In an effort to understand the history, evolution, and significant features of hermeneutics, I will engage in close and reflective readings of the great hermeneutic texts, including most specifically Gadamer's (1989/2013) *Truth and Method*. Additionally, I will explore the practices and publications of relevant contemporary educators, academics, and literary theorists in an attempt to understand the manner in which they have woven the principles of hermeneutics into their work. In this way, I hope to begin articulating what a coherent and vibrant approach to teaching (with) literature might look like. Moules, McCaffrey, Field, and Laing (2015) insist that "reading in the hermeneutic tradition involves a practice of learning to read self and world differently" (p. 65). The primary hermeneutic texts they argue, "resist being read," are "dense and layered in their complexity," often reaching "back into traditions, Greek and otherwise,

that are relatively obscure" (pp. 65-66). Nevertheless, I endeavor to read in the manner required of the practicing hermeneut, to read iteratively and reflexively, for as Moules et al. (2015) suggest,

> Action in the world refigures both our perceptions, and the elements that condition our perceptions and our pre-understanding. Thus it is that we may find ourselves transformed by reading, emerging into a different self, and our actions too are transformed, in the dynamic transaction between text, self, and world. (p. 66)

It is this type of reading in which I intend to become practiced, as I journey through the texts in question.

In addition to my reading in the hermeneutic tradition, I will write "as a method of nomadic inquiry" as outlined in Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) exploration of writing as a means of data *collection*, as well as data *analysis*. In charting her own research experience, St. Pierre acknowledges the existence of "all sorts of data [she] had never read about in interpretive qualitative textbooks," some of which she calls "*dream data, sensual data, emotional data, response data…*and *memory data*" and argues that these data did not appear in her fieldnotes or transcripts "where data are supposed to be, for how can one textualize everything one thinks and senses in the course of a study?" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970, emphasis in original). These species of data were, however, a part of her experience as a researcher and, as such, "cropped up unexpectedly and fittingly in [her] writing – fugitive, fleeting data that were excessive and out-of-category" (p. 971). Such data, it seems, may only be collected "*in the writing*" (p. 970, emphasis in original). Furthermore, argues St. Pierre, writing serves as a powerful

method of data *analysis,* for thinking happens within and as a result of the writing process:

> Data collection and data analysis cannot be separated when writing is a method of inquiry. And positivist concepts, such as audit trails and data saturation, become absurd and then irrelevant in postmodern qualitative inquiry in which writing is a field of play where anything can happen – and does. (p. 971)

The prospect of such work is both invigorating and daunting, for though writing as a method of inquiry holds great potential for generative insight, it is difficult at this liminal and nascent stage of the process to anticipate the nature of those insights. Indeed, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) acknowledge that there exists no prescriptive model for such work "since each researcher and each study requires different writing" (p. 971). Thus – somewhat dizzyingly – it seems that only *through* the process of writing and reflecting upon my research will I come to know and articulate the exact nature of my inquiring.[7]

[7] I am encouraged by Moules et al.'s (2015) assertion that "Tolerance of uncertainty is required to push on when the interpretation is constantly stumbling, when we are constantly living with our own inadequacy as readers, and the text easily outdistances us. Tolerance of uncertainty is required to live on the scraps of understanding that come from difficult reads, and most importantly, it is required to let the reading change what we know and what we do to become estranged from ourselves" (p. 66).

## Chapter 3: Learning to Inhabit Literature Hermeneutically

In an effort to understand the primary principles and tenets of hermeneutics and the manner in which they may inform the ways we teach (with) literature, it seems we must venture forward in two distinct realms. The following chapter, then, represents a two-sided investigation. The first dimension of my inquiry necessarily involves an investigation into the nature of hermeneutics. I primarily locate my investigation within the writings of Gadamer (1989/2013), specifically his seminal text *Truth & Method* – an appropriate locus, for, as Moules et al. (2015) suggest, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics has been increasingly taken up by researchers in practice disciplines, due in large part to the fact that he endeavors to "work out a thoroughgoing philosophy of how it is that human beings come to understanding" (p. 33). Incorporating Heidegger's conceptualization of being-in-the-world within his own philosophical framework, Gadamer "not only incorporates an account of changing understanding but also leads us to expect it" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 33). In my efforts, therefore, to understand the nature and practice of hermeneutics – and its implications for reading and interpreting literature, in a classroom or otherwise – Gadamer's (1989/2013) *Truth and Method* will assuredly provide a complex and illuminating textual landscape.

The second element of my investigation involves an exploration of some of the work arising from the field of cognitive literary studies. At first glance, this may seem a curious choice, given Gadamer's insistence that the assumptions and aims of the natural sciences have confused and undermined the manner in which research in the human sciences has traditionally been conducted. Presumably, a field so named – with its emphasis on the *cognitive* dimension of literary engagement, and apparent scientific

orientation – would threaten to reify the Enlightenment assumptions and paradigms Gadamer endeavors to undo. Zunshine (2015), however, argues that this is not the case, and in fact suggests that "consilience with science…, though an attractive ideal theoretically," often effectively undermines the nature of literary reading and problematically subsumes the activity into a rigidly scientific epistemology (p. 2). Moreover, argues Zunshine (2015), "given what a messy proposition the human mind/brain is and how little we still know about it, striving toward a grand unified theory of cognition and literature is to engage in mythmaking" (p. 1). In characterizing the field of cognitive literary studies, therefore, Zunshine (2015) is careful to emphasize its plurality and multiplicity, and offers the following description:

> Though 'vitally interested' in cognitive science, cognitive literary critics work not toward consilience with science but toward a richer engagement with a variety of theoretical paradigms in literary and cultural studies…. So while cognitive literary scholars draw on insights from cognitive science, they approach them critically and pragmatically, thinking through them on the terms of their own discipline. (p. 2)

Zunshine's (2015) comments reveal why it is that cognitive literary studies are in fact compatible with Gadamer's hermeneutics. For, rather than building toward a universal method or stable (and ostensibly objective) formulation of what happens within the human brain when we read, the scholars that comprise this field seek – introspectively –

to understand what it means to read and interpret within specific traditions and contexts.[8] Interestingly, because such scholars "don't see themselves as working on a puzzle whose pieces must fit neatly together, they feel no need to iron out differences among their 'potentially conflicting aims and methodologies'" (Zunshine, p. 1). Beyond mere compatibility, however, hermeneutics and cognitive literary theory share a similar orientation, insofar as both constitute an investigation and exploration into human understanding and interpretation. Consequently, an investigation of the intersections between hermeneutics and cognitive literary studies is particularly appropriate for the individual seeking to better understand the various phenomena associated with reading, understanding, and teaching (with) literature.

**Gadamer's Insistence on Prejudice as a Condition of Understanding**

West (1979) identifies Schleiermacher as the father of hermeneutics, for his "Copernican Revolution…[which] shifted the focus from understanding texts to the process of understanding itself" (p. 71). Indeed, Schleiermacher's (1819) lectures demonstrate a concerted effort to introduce a hermeneutic method – historically employed in exegetical readings of religious texts – to the human sciences. Schleiermacher argued that the job of the reader-interpreter was to "place himself in the position of the author, to project himself into the author's subjectivity, and in that way try to understand…the author's intended meaning" (Richter, 2007, p. 719). However, as is common with the tradition of critical theory in the 19th and 20th centuries, hermeneutics

[8] Zunshine also draws an important distinction between her field, and that of the "Literary Darwinists," a "small but vocal group of critics who practice scientism in the name of 'scientific' literary analysis, [and who] believe that science today can already explain literature better than the benighted and fraudulent English studies" (Zunshine, 2015, p. 2).

experiences a major shift – in this case, with the contributions of Gadamer (Richter, 2007, p. 719). For Gadamer (1989/2013), Schleiermacher's idea that the interpreter should "clear his or her mind of the prejudices and the mental detritus of the present age, so as to be able to enter, with a clean mental slate, the world of the author" was simply untenable (Richter, 2007, p. 719). Gadamer (2007) writes,

> Schleiermacher and, following him, 19th-century science, conceive the task of hermeneutics in a way that is formally universal. They were able to harmonize it with the natural sciences' ideal of objectivity, but only by ignoring the concentration of historical consciousness in hermeneutical theory. (p. 729)

For Gadamer, one's stance, as an interpretive being, is fundamentally and firmly located within a particular historical and cultural moment – to attempt to ignore or transcend one's own situated-ness or historicity would be naïve and, ultimately, futile. We may, however, endeavor to understand from *within* the "flux of history" and learn to identify "the multifarious influences of our time and place" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 38). The aim of such efforts, argues Gadamer (1989/2013), is to achieve a "historically effected consciousness," or a consciousness of the ways in which our interpreting is necessarily influenced by our temporality (p. 312). The reader of literature, then, must – through hermeneutic study – work to discover and understand his or her idiosyncratic prejudices when interpreting a text. Indeed, Gadamer (2007) explains,

> a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious

> assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (p. 723).

This very much distinguishes hermeneutics from other critical projects for here Gadamer actively resists the enlightenment impulse to strip subjectivity away from the interpretive enterprise. For Gadamer (2007), the "fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power" (p. 724). He would, therefore, reinstate prejudice[9] as a condition of understanding, which arises as one locates oneself within a tradition, "in which past and present are constantly fused" (pp. 725, 728).

In an essay entitled "Art and the View from Nowhere," Burri (2007) examines the extent to which our efforts to create art constitute a mode of self-interrogation. His argument, though not nominally hermeneutic, colourfully illustrates the notions of Gadamerian prejudice and historically effected consciousness. Burri envisions a "subjective-objective continuum of standpoints" (p. 310). Traditionally, when seeking scientific truth, argues Burri, we try to move upwards along the continuum, towards increasing objectivity, ultimately aiming to achieve a "view from nowhere," or a view unencumbered by personal prejudice (p. 310). Conversely, in artistic endeavors, we move in the opposite direction – that is, we move downwards along the continuum, "aiming at artistic expression and the view of the self" (p. 310). He explains:

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[9] Gadamer (2007) is quick to point out that "it is not until the enlightenment that the concept of prejudice acquires the negative aspect we are familiar with" (p. 724). In addition to the English word *prejudice*, he also considers the German *vorurteil* and the French *préjugé* as having become significantly limited in meaning since the enlightenment, today meaning quite simply an "unfounded judgment" (p. 724).

> Art is directed at a subjective representation of reality. Its goal is to conduct some kind of *phenomenological investigation* into how things appear to us. Their nature, their hidden structure, and the laws governing their interaction are, by contrast of no concern to the artistic description of reality. (pp. 310-311, emphasis in original)

As a point of illustration, Burri (2007) considers Cézanne and other impressionist artists who sought to communicate how the world appeared to them *phenomenologically* (p. 312). Impressionism was seen as a radical movement precisely because its adherents actively spurned established conventions (and supposed objective interpretations of how the world looks) in favour of highly personalized renderings of how they perceived a particular scene. Thus, Burri (2007) argues:

> If we want to know what it is really like to *see* something, if we want to recover how things present themselves to our senses, as opposed to our thoughts, if we want to focus on our own perspective, not on the things perceived, we must uncover, underneath all our perceptual habits, a socially and conceptually unaffected relation between the sensible self and the world sensed. (p. 311, emphasis in original)

Ultimately, Burri argues that the aims of art and science are diametrically opposed, insisting that art moves in the opposite direction from science, from the objective to the subjective (pp. 309-310). Vitally, however, Burri's argument does not render all art solipsistic or wholly relative, a move that would ultimately violate Gadamer's (2013) characterization of the "hermeneutical *situation*" (p. 312, emphasis in original). Instead, Burri considers what cognitive gains "such an investigative journey to the land of the

subjective" may produce: "One quick answer is this: Because the appearances do as much depend on our own constitution…as on the external world, an investigation of the way things appear to us is *an investigation of who we are"* (p. 315, emphasis added). It is here, that Burri's thinking takes on a special resonance with Gadamer's notions of prejudice and historically effected consciousness, for in creating art, Burri argues, one seeks to interrogate and understand one's own perspective in the world. In this sense, then, our artistic projects are hermeneutic in that they preserve – in fact *celebrate* – Gadamer's (2013) notion of prejudice.

If we are to read literature hermeneutically, then, one requirement is that we resist the temptation to characterize literary texts as repositories of stable and objective "truths." Quite the opposite, in fact – we must move downward along Burri's (2007) continuum, towards a view *from* the self and, ultimately, "of the self" (p. 310). Richter (2007) summarizes this hermeneutic maneuver nicely: "As a result of our interaction with the text, we as readers not only come to understand the text better, we also come to understand ourselves better, in that we become more conscious of the historical place from which we interpret" (p. 720). Burri (2007) cautions us, however, that such work is difficult. Indeed, he notes that Cézanne's "still-lives and his numerous paintings devoted to the Mont Sainte-Victoire in southern France prove both the importance and the difficulty, even for a most talented artist, of producing an accurate representation of how things really appear *to us*" (p. 312, emphasis added). As readers, if we are to preserve a Gadamerian sense of prejudice in our interpretations of texts, then we must endeavor to pay close attention to our temporal (and sociohistorical) mooring, and the manner in which it affects our reading and interpreting. Mooring, in fact, may prove a useful

metaphor here, for Gadamer would have us become acutely aware of the implications of our being anchored within a particular sociohistorical moment. We must also, consequently, consider the necessarily limited extent of our interpretive gaze as we lift our eyes to the proverbial horizon.

**Understanding as a Fusion of Horizons**

One of the central metaphors emerging from Gadamer's (1989/2013) seminal work *Truth and Method* is that of the meaning-horizon. Because he is primarily concerned with the process of interpretation, Gadamer (2007) considers the problem of the finite view an interpreter necessarily experiences, by virtue of the fact that she is rooted in a particular temporal moment (p. 735). Being located in time necessarily limits one's perspective; thus, Gadamer envisages the liminal[10] edge of the interpreter's view as a horizon (p. 737). Texts too, are temporal entities – products of the time in which they were created – and thus have their own horizons. Understanding, argues Gadamer (2007), "is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves" (p. 737). For Gadamer, then, interpretive reading is dialogical, for "the meaning-horizon of the reader and the meaning-horizon of the text impinge upon each other" (Richter,

[10] Etymologically, liminality (from the Latin *limen*) suggests a literal threshold, a structural crosspiece delineating a familiar and domestic inner realm from the expansive and more alien world without. Conceptually, then, liminality illustrates an important relationship – between the immediately familiar and the more distant unknown – within hermeneutic interpretation.

2007, p. 720).[11] Consequently, due to the temporal nature of texts' and interpreters' respective horizons, each age must interpret a text "in its own way" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 731). It follows then, argues Gadamer, that "the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process" (p. 733). In this way, the iterative cycle of interpretation is renewed each time a reader grapples with a text.

Though his work is not strictly hermeneutic, Frank B. Farrell's (2007) arguments regarding the purpose and value of literature resonate with Gadamer's (1989/2013) thinking in this regard. In an essay entitled "The way light at the edge of a beach in autumn is learned," Farrell (2007) presents a defense for literature as cognitively beneficial, and much of his thinking demonstrates a hermeneutic pulse insofar as it addresses the manner in which reader and text commune across the space that divides them. Indeed, one of the cognitive benefits of literature, argues Farrell (2007), is that

> it allows us to expand our own sphere of experience through inhabiting the phenomenology of another. In this manner we come to understand more about the world, through what we come to see, and more about others' ways of seeing…, [for] language is a means of storage and transfer that allows communication to others even across generations. (p. 256)

While Farrell's primary purpose here is to highlight the cognitive benefits of literature, his assertion regarding one's "sphere of experience" assuredly echoes Gadamer's

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[11] Interestingly, the distance between the temporal horizons of text and interpreter would naturally seem a gulf to be traversed, and yet in discussing this problem of historicity, Gadamer (2007) would have us re-characterize the seemingly negative space to a positive one. He argues: "the important thing is to recognize the distance in time as a positive and productive possibility of understanding. It is not a yawning abyss, but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which all that is handed down presents itself to us" (p. 732).

(1989/2013) thinking regarding the horizon of an interpreter. Importantly, both formulations illustrate the manner in which one negotiates the interaction between self and text. We should neither disregard personal experience when interpreting a text, nor should we focus solely upon it. Both Farrell (2007) and Gadamer (1989/2013) emphasize the importance of a convergence between one's personal sphere or horizon, and that of the text.

Similarly, in her own examination of the capacity-building potential of literature, Feagin (2007) too considers the relative distance between the experiences of readers and texts, and argues that fiction is particularly "well-suited to help readers acquire a deep understanding of how a person might do such a thing" (p. 65). Interestingly, as a part of this process, she also considers the ways in which readers' dispositions colour their interpretation of literary texts. She argues that one's background experiences, attitudes, and beliefs are "recruited to play roles in how one reads a particular segment or passage of text" (p. 59). Such personal histories, argues Feagin (2007), "*condition* mental activity because they provide background conditions for one's thoughts and other responses" (p. 60, emphasis in original). And, in Feagin (2007) too, we identify a hermeneutic sensibility underpinning her argument that readers' interpretations are inherently coloured by their experience – and by extension, their temporal mooring – echoing again, the work of Gadamer (2007) who, in considering what it means to inhabit the thinking of another, asks: "What do we mean by 'placing ourselves' in a situation? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, in that we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must also *bring ourselves"* (p. 736, emphasis added). Understanding the meaning of a text hermeneutically then, as Gadamer (2007)

tells us, is a dialogic process wherein a reader works to fuse her perspective, or meaning-horizon, with that of the text she interprets (p. 731).

A second requirement, therefore, of learning to read literature hermeneutically must be to conceptualize the distance between author and reader according to the Gadamerian notion of horizons. Ostensibly, this may seem a simple maneuver, yet it will require significant reorientation, particularly for those readers accustomed to checking their own experiences at the proverbial door, while mining literary texts for essential and stable truths. Indeed, as Gadamer tells us, "the working out of the hermeneutical situation means the achievement of the *right* horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter [with a text]" (p. 735, emphasis added). Promisingly, however, such a reorientation would seem to reconcile both sides of the text-based/reader-based debate, to which Milner and Milner (2002) refer, for the notion of horizons is a richer and more inclusive conceptualization of the interactive relationship between text and reader. Curiously, however, it is a conceptualization with profound ontological implications.

**The Ontological Dimension: Heidegger's Being-in-the-World**

In tracing the development of modern hermeneutics, Gadamer (2007) identifies the "decisive turning point" introduced by Heidegger's ontological reimagining of the hermeneutic circle (p. 730). He explains that 19th century hermeneuticists such as Schleiermacher described a "circular movement of understanding" from part to whole of a text, which "runs backwards and forwards…and disappears when [the text] is perfectly understood" (p. 730). Heidegger, however, radicalizes the hermeneutic circle by describing understanding as the "interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter," thus entailing an ontological dimension to the act of

interpretation (Gadamer, 2007, p. 730). Gadamer (2007) explains that, for Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle "is not a 'methodological' circle, but…an ontological structural element of understanding" (p. 730). Petruzzi (2008) succinctly summarizes this move:

> Ontological hermeneuticists articulate the ontological structures of understanding and interpretation – as modes of human existence that disclose and appropriate one's environing world…. For ontological hermeneuticists, human being comes to presence through involvements that open understanding of a world…. Interpretation is an ontological relation in which being increases as one appropriates understanding in the performance of a project. (p. 221)

Given the first two principles of hermeneutics already discussed (the Gadamerian notions of *prejudice* and *interpretive horizons*), it should come as no surprise that we should hit upon ontology as a dimension of understanding, for repeatedly Gadamer (2007) has reinforced the experientially (and temporally) informed identity of each given interpreter as having a central role in the meaning-making process.[12] And once again, we may draw connections to the work being done in the field of literary cognitivism.

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[12] Part of Gadamer's (1989/2013) investigation into the nature of aesthetics – and hermeneutic interpretation more generally – relies upon the concept of *play*. Interestingly, for Gadamer (1989/2013), *play* is illustrative of the ontology of a work of art (p. 106). He is quick to distinguish *play*, however, from mere subjectivity: "When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither…the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself" (p. 106). Gadamer considers the various ways in which we use the word "play" in everyday language, including, "the play of light, …the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words" (p. 108). Importantly, each instance emphasizes a "to-and-fro movement" that "renews itself in constant repetition" (p. 108). Play, therefore, takes place "in between" (p. 113). A work of literature, consequently, "cannot simply be isolated from the 'contingency' of the chance conditions in which it appears" (p. 120).

Returning to the work of Farrell (2007) once again, there is an interesting correlation to the arguments presented by the hermeneuticists. Farrell (2007) examines the manner in which literature provides readers with a tool to continue, "on a more sophisticated level, one of the crucial tasks of childhood: forming a model of self-in-relation-to-the-world," both cognitively and affectively (p. 254). Thus, for Farrell, reading and interpreting are inherently existential activities, for in the act of reading, we continually refine our understanding of ourselves. Farrell (2007) in fact goes a step further, to suggest not only the ontological consequences of engaging with a literary text, but also the biological:

> In the literary case, it must be that some of the patterns triggered and strengthened in the reader's brain…prove useful in making sense of new situations as the reader goes forth from the book to the world. It is a properly literary virtue as well as an engineering one that the nearly miraculous semantic compression of some works of fiction and poetry allows connections to form in the brain among what previously had been unrelated elements. (p. 252)

From a neurological standpoint, this is not a startling revelation, for synaptic connections are made routinely, as a matter of course. From a literary standpoint, however, this is a powerful reminder that in the act of reading, we fundamentally and powerfully affect ourselves – the way we exist in the world, and the very ways in which we are intellectually, experientially, and biologically wired.

A third requirement, then, of hermeneutic reading in the literature classroom must be to grapple philosophically with the potential for literature to fundamentally and ontologically change who we are. Sumara (2002) examines this idea in great detail and

espouses a theory of learning that "conceptualizes human identity as co-evolving with the production of knowledge" (p. 9). Identity, Sumara (2002) argues, "emerges from relationships, including relationships people have with books" (p. 9). It may seem, at first, that a requirement of the teacher of literature to engage in a discussion of the ontological potency of literature with her students, would be unduly esoteric. And yet surely such a discussion is of the utmost importance if we are ever to articulate a coherent theory of how to teach (with) literature that might help address the exasperated student's cry, "*why are we reading this?"*

**Application as an Inherent Element of Hermeneutic Understanding**

In discussing *Truth and Method*, Dostal (2002) reminds us that, for Gadamer, the application of knowledge is not "an external, after the fact, use of understanding" but is instead an always present, implicit, and inherent element *of* understanding (p. 3). Gadamer (1989/2013), in fact, identifies three original constituent elements of hermeneutic understanding: *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation), and *subtilitas applicandi* (application) (p. 318). He argues, however, that the hermeneutic problem of *application* must be recovered, for the romantics, in their recognition of "the inner unity of *intelligere* and *explicare*" ultimately "excluded [application] from any connection with hermeneutics" (p. 318). This is highly problematic for Gadamer, who sees understanding as always involving "something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (p. 319). He argues, therefore, that we must learn to regard interpretation, understanding, and application, as "comprising one unified process" (p. 319). As a point of illustration, Gadamer invokes the practice of legal interpretation, for in practicing law, interpreting

and understanding a legal text "and discovering how to apply it in a particular legal instance are not two separate actions, but one unitary process" (p. 321). The same is true, maintains Gadamer, in any instance of textual interpretation, for it is impossible to extricate the practice of application from the process of reading:

> [there is no reader] who, when he has his text before him, simply reads what is there. Rather, all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends…. Application does not mean first understanding a given universal in itself and then afterward applying it to a concrete case. It is the very understanding of the universal – the text – itself. (Gadamer, 2013, pp. 349-350)

Such a conceptualization of the reading process is, of course, compatible with – indeed *implicated* by – Gadamer's earlier insistence of prejudice as a condition of understanding.

In an essay entitled "The laboratory of the mind," Elgin (2007) investigates the nature of what we mean when we say we have learned something from an encounter with a fictional text. For Elgin, such claims are "epistemologically problematic, [for] works of fiction neither are, nor purport to be, literally true" (p. 43). Elgin's thinking here is primarily concerned with the cognitive value of learning from and within literary texts, but there is an important resonance in her arguments with Gadamer's (2013) insistence that application is an inherent and requisite component of understanding. Elgin (2007) illustrates:

> the widely read, aesthetically sensitive reader is the counterpart of the naturalist. Her experience equips her to know what to look for, what to focus on, what characterizations are important. Approaching fiction thoughtfully and sensitively,

> she reflects on a work and her reactions to it. She reads a work in light of her understanding of the world, and understands the world in light of the works she has read. (p. 52)

The communion between reader and text, as described here by Elgin, is self-evidently dialogic and hermeneutic. Importantly, the reader, as characterized above, does not presume to interpret her literary text in a vacuum. Rather, she applies her understanding of the world in and through her reading of the text and, at the same time, applies her understanding of the text in and through her reading of the world. Application is an inextricable part of what it means to interpret and understand. Elgin (2007) suggests that a literary text

> that is not, does not purport to be, and is not taken to be true, [nevertheless] enables us to see or recognize truths that we might otherwise miss…. When Don Quixote overlooks the obvious and sees Dulcinea as beautiful, we awaken to the possibility of finding beauty against all odds in the most unpromising circumstances. (p. 53)

Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine (2001) too, identify the manner in which reading literary texts necessarily involves an element of application that should not – indeed *cannot* – be excised from the process of hermeneutic interpretation. Literary texts, argue Clifford et al. (2001), "do not simply add stockpiles of 'images' or 'concepts' to the one doing the reading. They reveal layers of the living world, add meaning to the creases on the faces" (p. 17). Clifford et al.'s language here demonstrates the powerful implications of Gadamerian application: when we spend time with(in) literary texts in deep and thoughtful ways, we "blend and blur two 'realms,'" enlivening our lived experience as

literary insights become "living, breathing figure[s] that haunt the living, breathing world" (pp. 47, 49).

Gadamer (1989/2013) invokes the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* – moral or practical knowledge – in an effort to illustrate that hermeneutic interpretation "is clearly distinct from 'pure' knowledge detached from any particular kind of being" (p. 324). *Phronesis*, Moules et al. (2015) explain, "demands judgment and action *within* a situation" (p. 50, emphasis added). Gadamer (1989/2013) explains, by considering the work of a teacher of ethics, who does not consider the principles of her subject to be norms "found in the stars…[occupying] an unchanging place in a natural moral universe, so that all that would be necessary would be to perceive them" (p. 330). Equally, however, such ethical principles are not "mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing – except that the latter is always itself determined in each case by the use the moral consciousness makes of them" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 330).

The implications of *phronesis* and hermeneutic interpretation for the literature teacher are profound. Indeed, a fourth requirement of reading hermeneutically, is to resist the idea that it is ever appropriate – or even *possible* – to interpret a text in a hermetically-sealed vacuum, a neutral plane. The "view from nowhere," to borrow Burri's (2007) language, does not, in fact, exist. Clifford et al. (2001) provide a powerful description of what it means to read in this sense, which:

> opens us up to a world of meaning, attachment, and consequence; a world that, if deeply understood, generously counterposes the world we take for granted, putting that world, our ordinary world, into perspective. It makes our horizons of action, belief, and hope visible as not simply "the way things are," but as readings

> that could have been otherwise…. The "real world," interpretively understood, thus becomes a place in which we must decide what reading might be best here, now, in these circumstances. Reading becomes a deeply ethical and pedagogical act. What way of proceeding would best evoke balance and respect in these circumstances we face? (pp. 19-20)

Hermeneutically understood, literature in the classroom is very much "about us, about this real world and these real children" (Clifford et al., 2001, p. 20). Learning to read literature in this way, however, will almost certainly require practice. The correlations Gadamer draws to the world of legal interpretation and Aristotelian *phronesis* serve as important reminders that the development of such a disposition requires continual rehearsal, development and refinement over time. As interpreters and handlers of literature, then, we must endeavor to become hermeneutically practiced – that is, hermeneutically *experienced* – readers in the classroom.

**Becoming Experienced: *Erfahrung***

In an effort to describe the "essence of the hermeneutic experience" (Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. 355), Gadamer considers Hegel's dialectical account of experience, which he characterizes as "skepticism in action" (p. 362). Hegel's conceptualization "has some truth" for Gadamer, insofar as it acknowledges experience to be "initially always experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be" (p. 363). This makes sense to Gadamer, for whom experience subsists exclusively in individual observation, "not known in a previous universality" (p. 360). The problem, however, becomes clear when we follow the trajectory of Hegel's thinking to its ultimate and logical conclusion:

> For Hegel, it is necessary, of course, that conscious experience should lead to a self-knowledge that no longer has anything other than or alien to itself. For him the consummation of experience is "science," the certainty of itself in knowledge. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 363)

Hegel's description, then, "does not do justice to hermeneutical consciousness" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 364) for, when taken to its logical conclusion, Hegel's conceptualization of experience is understood to be teleological. That is, the goal of experience is to eventually arrive at a stable sense of knowledge. This conceptualization, argues Gadamer (1989/2013), is misguided:

> The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences….[The] experienced person proves to be…someone who is radically undogmatic….The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (p. 364)

Gadamer identifies this understanding of experience as *Erfahrung*. Moules et al. (2015) highlight an important implication of Gadamer's thinking here, suggesting that there is a profound "humility in hermeneutics" due to the fact that experience – understood as *Erfahrung* – "means that one cannot know what is coming…, [that] we are not all-comprehending masters of the world (nor can become so)" (p. 45). This is the central point for Gadamer, that in becoming experienced, we make ourselves more open to novelty, to the *next* case; we render our perceptions and convictions more susceptible to revision.

There is an interesting correlation between Gadamer's theory of *Erfahrung* and the cognitive-evolutionary literary criticism of Nancy Easterlin. In considering the development of ancestral humans, Easterlin (2015) suggests that becoming *habituated* to a particular environment – that is, becoming *experienced* within a specific locale – actually helped attune such populations to any source of novel sensory data. From a cognitive-evolutionary standpoint, becoming habituated to a familiar environment makes sense, in that less processing power is required to navigate the otherwise overwhelming multitude of sensory data one would regularly encounter. In this way, argues Easterlin (2015), habituation actually "enables focused cognitive orientation toward novelty" (p. 617). I think it worthwhile to consider the connection between habituation in this sense, and Gadamer's theory of *Erfahrung*, for both concepts underscore the extent to which experience attunes us to novelty.[13] Indeed, Easterlin (2015) considers the manner in which we become habituated to a familiar environment and suggests that the "purpose of literary art…is to make the familiar strange, to defamiliarize the everyday" (p. 615). Easterlin colourfully offers: "If the startling experience of stepping out of bed into foot-deep water prompts attention, so does the experience of literary novelty" (p. 618). It is here we understand a fifth feature of hermeneutic reading. Gadamer's conceptualization of *Erfahrung* reminds us that becoming an experienced reader does not mean working

[13] Interestingly, Easterlin acknowledges the ambivalence ancestral humans would have felt upon encountering something novel in their midst. While new environments are welcome, she explains, "because they afford unexpected opportunities, they also hold potentially fatal dangers. As a result, humans exhibit an ambivalent nature…. This ambivalence in the face of novelty and knowledge is characteristic of the human orientation to life in general, including art" (p. 614). Without a doubt, such ambivalence is a regular feature of the literature classroom, wherein students often must grapple with the presence of something not previously encountered.

towards a stable and comprehensive understanding of all literature. Rather, an experienced reader is an attuned reader, sensitive to the *next* literary encounter, and how it may challenge her previously-held beliefs.

*Fahren*, the root of *Erfahrung*, means to journey or travel, and "has the connotation of raw experience taking one more deeply into the world" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 45). In his 2009 Massey Lectures, *The Wayfinders,* Canadian ethnobotanist Wade Davis explores the navigational wisdom of ancient Polynesian seafaring peoples, and in his writing, we find a powerful and fitting illustration of *Erfahrung.* In an effort to understand the set of requisite skills required of the navigator or wayfinder, Davis embarked upon a short journey with Nainoa Thompson, a navigator and member of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, in a modern version of the ancient catamaran used by these peoples. Despite the fact that European navigators of the 16th and 17th centuries had not yet found a way to chart longitude, the Polynesian peoples had, long before, colonized an incredible swath of the South Pacific on such small craft (Davis, 2009, p. 41). Davis (2009) explains the manner in which each craft made its way through uncharted waters, with the sole aid of a highly attuned navigator who:

> must process an endless flow of data, intuitions and insights derived from observation and the dynamic rhythms and interactions of wind, waves, clouds, stars, sun, moon, the flight of birds, a bed of kelp, the glow of phosphorescence on a shallow reef – in short, the constantly changing world of weather and the sea. (p. 60)

It is the dynamic nature of the ocean – it's "constantly changing" – that is relevant here, for encountering the *next* case, the specific, the new, is what informs the wayfinder and

makes navigation possible. *Erfahrung*, as illustrated here, is the product of a literal journeying into uncharted waters. Rather than culminating in perfect knowledge, however, experience in this sense produces an openness, a curiosity and attunement to the unfamiliar, and as yet unencountered. Surely, the same must be said of experienced readers, as they navigate literary texts, and encounter the unfamiliar in their midst. Working with students to approach literature hermeneutically, then, entails cultivating a sense of *Erfahrung*, and endeavouring to understand the manner in which it may emerge over time, and through multitudinous and varied experiences.

## Chapter 4: Moments to Interrogate Hermeneutically

> *Hermeneutic study of teaching situations as described in narrative accounts of educational work and relationships continues to contribute to our knowledge of the consistencies, inconsistencies, and heuristics…of the relational truths that are possible between teacher, learner, and what is to be learned*.
>
> – Fowler, 2006, p. 127
>
> *The hermeneutics developed here is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences…. I did not intend to produce a manual for guiding understanding in the manner of the earlier hermeneutics. I did not wish to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedure of the human sciences…. My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.*
>
> – Gadamer, 1989/2013, pp. xxii, xxv-xxvi

In discussing hermeneutics as a practice, Moules et al. (2015) acknowledge its affinity to (and adoption by) such various practice-oriented fields as "teaching, social work, counseling, nursing, and medicine" (p. 51). Importantly, they identify a tension that exists between "generalizable scientific knowledge" that practice disciplines integrate (to greater or lesser degrees) and "application in the particular situation" (p. 51). This is a tension I have struggled with throughout the formative years of my career as a teacher. Unsurprisingly, Gadamer acknowledged and addressed this tension and "emphasized the importance of keeping open the space of practice as a practice of human responsiveness" (Moules et al., 2015, pp. 51-52). This is precisely what I aim to do in the ensuing pages. What follows, is my attempt to think (and write) through significant experiences in my life as a teacher. Having pulled the thread, followed the lead that was tugging at me in my student's question – *Why are we reading this?* – I have attempted to put "what [I] know at risk" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 65) such that I might genuinely investigate this phenomenon of teaching (with) literature in a high school setting. I have included three

moments from my teaching life that I intend to interrogate hermeneutically. My aim is to attend to each moment carefully, "walk[ing] around the phenomenon, seeing it from different angles":

> In hermeneutic work, being called by a phenomenon does not immediately license one to rush into the world armed with a method, but rather, calls for the careful probing and questioning of what appears. One must learn from the phenomenon, both about what it is a case of, but also about what this one case requires to deepen understanding of both the instance and its context. (Moules et al., 2015, p. 62)

In this description, Moules et al. identify a critical aspect of this practice. In seeking to understand particular moments, I am also endeavoring to understand the context within which I have worked and taught for the last eight years. I seek to understand the nature of my teaching, what happens to me "over and above [my] wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. xvii) Encouragingly, Fowler (2006) suggests such "Revelatory research is critical to the educational enterprise and is at the core of what learning is; it keeps the teacher authentically engaged in learning" (p. 128). In each of these three experiential moments to follow, I consider some aspect, some tension or difficulty, related to my experience as an English teacher. In presenting and interpreting these moments, I hope to "practice a disciplined kind of vigilance" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 65) such that I might learn from my experience.

**His Father was a Glove-maker**

In my third year of teaching, I was handed a high school English class for the very first time. I had expressed interest in transitioning to a high school setting, and so was

grateful for the opportunity. Shortly thereafter, however, I remember very clearly sitting down to plan the course and immediately feeling anxious about the brevity of the high school semester. Four and a half months. In that time, according to curricular requirements, we would tackle a wide variety of fiction and poetry, memoirs, essays, visual texts and film, at least one novel, and a major play, Shakespearean or modern. A quick scan of the storage room shelves indicated it would be *Romeo & Juliet*.

My timeline suggested I should allocate four weeks to the study of the play. Four weeks to introduce my students not only to the play itself, but to the Elizabethan worldview, and to Shakespeare's antiquated language. I was quickly overwhelmed with just *how* I should lead my students into this enterprise. It seemed we could spend all semester considering the play, its language and themes, celebrated passages, its resonances in popular culture and film, not to mention a consideration of 16th-century London and the historical context out of which the play, and its author, were born.

A brief survey of resources designed to aid in the teaching of Shakespearean plays reveals a hackneyed – and, at times, bewildering – collection of approaches and materials. Composing "Shakespearean insults" out of phrases from his plays is a common introductory stratagem. Students will have fun, presumably, in lobbing such creative barbs at one another. In addition, a quick overview of Shakespeare's life can often be summarized in a few brief slides or illustrated panels. The dates of his birth and death, his house in Stratford, the fact that his father was a glove-maker, the Globe theatre. There are graphic novels of Shakespeare's plays. Websites such as *No Fear Shakespeare* provide modern language versions of the text side-by-side with the original. YouTube videos loudly explain various aspects of his plays in seven to ten-minute episodes. Once these

preliminaries are out of the way, and students can demonstrate a cursory understanding of Shakespeare's "life and times," one can presumably lead students into the play itself. I was baffled.

To a certain extent, such resources and approaches constitute a chaotic and noisy catalogue of the ways in which a now-ubiquitous writer and historical figure has been taken up, interpreted and reinterpreted, by popular culture. At best, however, the proliferation and popularity of such resources points to a profound assumption underlying much of the work we do with literary texts (particularly historical ones) in schools: that, in order to understand a text, students must understand (at least a little of) the author and his or her context. Such an assumption is a clear descendent of Romantic hermeneutic thought. Schleiermacher (1819, 1978), for instance, argues:

> One must keep in mind that what was written was often written in a different day and age from the one in which the interpreter lives; it is the primary task of interpretation not to understand an ancient text in view of modern thinking, but to *rediscover the original relationship between the writer and his audience*. (Schleiermacher, 1819, 1978, p. 6, emphasis added)

In considering how best to prepare students to read and interpret historical literary texts, I am confronted by this dilemma. To what extent *should* students come to know the historical soil out of which texts grow? Although he acknowledges the fact that understanding historical context (of text and author) is doubtlessly important, Gadamer (1989/2013) ultimately challenges Schleiermacher's understanding of hermeneutic interpretation, arguing:

> Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. In its continuance in an estranged state it acquires only a derivative, cultural existence. (p. 166)[14]

Interestingly, this tension between Schleiermacher and Gadamer is helpful in determining the ways in which I might lead students into a study of historical texts. In emphasizing the "historicity of our being," Gadamer reminds us that we are always and already informed by our temporal perspective. Endeavoring to understand a historical landscape without losing track of the fact that our own feet are necessarily rooted in time is the important interpretive work of fusing horizons. The implications for my teaching are clear: details of an author's biography or context must be taken up anew each time we turn our interpretive gaze upon his or her life and work, for in each instance, seemingly established details take on new resonances as we look upon them again, with our own freshly-born affairs and concerns necessarily affecting our view. Moreover, Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher's interpretive intentions is itself a profound philosophical insight, and worthy of student consideration. To what extent can we ever understand the mind of an author? To what extent should we try? Wrestling through such questions with students is assuredly a productive place to begin conversation in any literature classroom, and handled carefully might even encourage a joint endeavor, between students *and* teachers, as all involved cast a critical eye towards potential resources and supplementary instructional texts. What assumptions underpin this resource? What does it intend for us? Is it worthy of our time, given the nature of our work?

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[14] An apt description of the life of Shakespeare, as lived out in popular culture.

Returning to that feeling of anxious vertigo early in my career, over how exactly to guide students into a study of *Romeo and Juliet*, I recall a conversation with an administrator in the hallway just outside my classroom door. *Why are we still teaching Shakespeare? Can you tell me that?* I fumbled for a response, unconvincingly. I was unable, of course, in that hallway-moment with my administrator, to offer any argument beyond a vague personal vindication that the play still constituted a moving and compelling narrative, and that students – if given the chance – would be swept up by its momentum. In examining this moment retrospectively and hermeneutically, I am struck by the ontological implications of my administrator's question. In asking why we might still be teaching a Shakespearean play, he was implicitly asking what value or connection a four-hundred-year-old text might still have for students today. What purpose lay in reading such a text? What could such a text possibly have to say about students' lives today? Or, conversely, what might students have to say about a text removed so far in time and space from their own experiences? What value lay in learning to read antiquated language? In hearing antiquated voices? In essence, this seemingly simple question was asking a great deal about the ontological nature of both literature and those who read.

In his defense of literature and, more specifically, literary space, Farrell (2004) argues that works of literature may be powerfully revelatory and in fact *metaphysical*. He observes:

> The space of the literary text remains one where that life of the self, its fundamental way of setting itself in relation to the universe, its relations to fate and chance, to grief, death, and loss, are being enacted in a particular fashion, not

> only in the lives of the characters but also in the very processes of writing and reading. (p. 10)

These "very processes of writing and reading" lie at the heart of what literature is. In his examination of the ontology of art, and specifically literature, Gadamer (1989/2013) reminds us that, "being read belongs to literature by its nature" and, as such, "reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation" (p. 160). Like literature, the dramatic arts too require an audience, a spectator who "belongs essentially to the playing of the play" (Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. 131). Key for Gadamer is the fact that the reader (in the case of literature) or the spectator (in the case of a play) constitutes a fundamental element in the ontology of a work of art. The relationship between text and reader or play and spectator is dialogical, and has profound metaphysical consequences. To illustrate, Farrell (2004) offers the following analogy:

> Consider the difference between the objects that appear on the stage of a theatre and the way they are lit up by the lighting director, so that there is a background mood or space that makes them appear as having a certain style of being real…. In many powerful works of literature there is an implicit appearing of such a space or clearing, a coming into view of the way things are metaphysically lit up, so that a deeper sense of the universe, and of our place within it, seems to be at stake. (p. 10)

Farrell's (2004) thinking here – and assertions regarding the metaphysical potency of literary experience – very much echo Gadamer's (1989/2013) understanding of what it means to engage with a text:[15]

> The player, sculptor, or viewer is never simply swept away into a strange world of magic, of intoxication, of dream; rather, it is always his own world, and he comes to belong to it more fully by recognizing himself more profoundly in it. There remains a continuity of meaning which links the work of art with the existing world and from which even the alienated consciousness of a cultured society never quite detaches itself. (Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. 135)

The "alienated consciousness of a cultured society" is certainly suggestive of a twenty-first century public school classroom. And so, Gadamer's examination of literary experience (particularly the extent to which it is historically and temporally contingent), and Farrell's conceptualization of literary space, help inform my understanding of why it is that historical texts offer rich and metaphysically potent *thinking landscapes* for our students, and are no less deserving of a spot on a high school syllabus than more contemporary contributions.

Since that first semester, I have taught (with) the play several times, though never in the same way. Each year, it seems, I approach the endeavor differently. This year, however, my role has changed. Now working at the University of Lethbridge as a seconded Faculty Associate, I have been tasked with supervising a number of student-teachers in classrooms scattered across southern Alberta. Working in this capacity has

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[15] This should come as no surprise, given both Farrell's and Gadamer's acknowledgements of Heidegger's influence and contributions on the subject (Farrell, 2004, p. 10).

routinely become a humbling exercise in self-reflection, as I regularly encounter shades of myself in these preservice teachers.

> **Observation Notes:** *As I sit at the back of the classroom, I cannot shake the unnerving feeling that I am watching myself at the front of the classroom, eight years ago. Most troubling to me, is that throughout this lesson (indeed, I fear throughout much of my own early career), students are not genuinely consulted or considered. And in fact, they do not appear to be bothered by this arrangement. They seem to expect that now, having entered the hallways of a high school, they will be taught important and complex concepts. They will be taught Shakespeare. And, as a result, they dutifully open their notebooks and unquestioningly copy down details about Shakespeare's life. I very much want to stop the lesson, to interrupt the stream of scattered and fractured details emblazoned in authoritative bullet points on the carefully prepared slides and instead begin by asking the students what they know, or think, or wonder, or have encountered that has to do with this playwright, with the themes and ideas living, breathing, throbbing at the heart of this play. What have they heard? What do they know, already, at 16 years old, of love, lust, heartbreak, of fantasy and dream, of violence and betrayal, of loneliness and death? My sense is that they know a great deal. That if we might only be granted access to the intricately painted interiors of their heads and hearts, to the twisting alleyways of their own lived experiences, we would be shocked at how well they already understand Shakespeare, his preoccupations and passions, and the characters that embody them on the stage.*

In his *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters,* Sumara (2002) champions Commonplace Book practices as a visual and tangible record of the ways in which a reader weaves "aspects of his own life" into a text and, "at the same time, [allow the book to] become woven into him" (Sumara, 1996, p. 48): Commonplace Book activities…show that self/other, mind/body, personal/collective, fiction/non-fiction, literary/non-literary do not exist as tidy demarcated categories but, instead, exist ambiguously and fluidly in relationship with one another (Sumara, 2002, p. 24).

This *entanglement*, of reader and text, is a powerful image and one that clearly echoes Gadamer's (1989/2013) understanding of "the fundamental" hermeneutic problem of *application*. In describing the phenomenon of *application*, in fact, Gadamer (1989/2013) might just as well be writing about the creation of a Commonplace Book:

> The interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand…the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation *if he wants to understand at all*. (p. 333, emphasis added)

It seems increasingly clear that, to a certain extent, part of the discomfort I felt in my supervisory role at the back of this preservice teacher's classroom, arose from the fact that we were beginning to read a text together, without first considering who we were as readers, and what our role might be in reading. What might we bring to bear on that

which we encountered during our initial forays into the text? We happened to be sitting together in a classroom, each with our own copy of *Romeo and Juliet* before us. Ostensibly, we appeared ready to read. But what does that mean? What are my responsibilities as a reader? Where am "I" when I read? Where do "I" go? When such questions are left unasked and unconsidered, students and teachers unwittingly rely upon unexamined assumptions about what it means to read (individually, or together as a group), particularly regarding the nature of the interaction between reader and text. And this is precisely what Gadamer (1989/2013) is pointing to when he argues that the romantic conceptualization of hermeneutics wrongly excluded *subtilitas applicandi* (application) from hermeneutic practice. In charting the history of hermeneutics, Gadamer (1989/2013) points to the fact that theological, legal, *and* philological hermeneutics "originally belonged closely together," indicating that *application* was an "integral element of *all* understanding" (p. 319, emphasis added):

> In both legal and theological hermeneutics there is an essential tension between the fixed text – the law or the gospel – on the one hand and, on the other, the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation, either in judgment or in preaching. (p. 319)

According to Gadamer, it is this understanding of hermeneutic *application* which must be reinstated – or, more correctly, recognized *once again* – in all cases of textual interpretation (not just within the realms of law and theology). The significance of this point cannot be overstated, particularly within the context of a literature classroom, for it seems all too clear that we have inherited a partial understanding of what it means to read or interpret a text. Consequently, far too little time is spent with students considering the

nature of the reader-text relationship – our inherited practices, how we handle books in schools, remain unexamined or ignored.

In advocating Commonplace Book practices, Sumara (2002) emphasizes the importance of re-characterizing "literary experience [as] a place" and literary texts as "interesting interpretive sites that both clarify and complicate what we believe to be true" (pp. xvi, 8). He uses two important concepts to help explain his thinking here, the first of which he refers to as "the gradual instant," by which he means to describe the nature of how a reader's thinking changes over the course of ongoing and reflective engagements with texts:

> Although it is not always apparent, large shifts in thinking, like large changes in the natural world, are always preceded by a complex choreography of small changes. This helps us understand why it is sometimes necessary to develop sustained and close relationships with literary texts, over time, if deep insight is to be generated. (Sumara, 2002, pp. xv, xvi).

The notion that literary engagements can encourage profound insights for the reader, lies at the heart of Sumara's argument. For Sumara (2002), this is why reading literature in the public-school setting still matters: "literary interpretation practices can transform imaginative occasions into productive insights" (p. 5). Importantly, Sumara (2002) argues that the nature of such insight is often highly personal, and in doing so, he echoes Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutic application:

> One cannot understand the particularity of one's lived experiences easily or immediately…. One cannot say simply, fully or unambiguously what one's life is or what one means…. [Rather,] identity emerges from relationships, including

> relationships people have with books…. [L]iterary engagements contribute to the ongoing invention of the reading subject. (pp. 7, 9, 12).

Sumara's (2002) "gradual instant," then, emphasizes the importance of time spent with a text in a sustained and reflective state of mind, such that we might gain a level of insight into our own thinking and relationship to a particular set of ideas: in short, the "gradual instant" recognizes Gadamerian *application* as a fundamental aspect of literary interpretation.

The second, and perhaps more evocative, concept Sumara (2002) presents is the notion of reading as an act of "troubling bodies" (pp. 37-48), a play on words, for "bodies" in this sense refers not just to the bodies of knowledge inherent in a given text, but to the *intersection* of bodies (biological, literary and theoretical) present in the act of reading (p. 40). Sumara considers the notion of "troubling" or *disrupting* to be vitally important, arguing that human "perception needs to be interrupted in order for it to become better able to attend to the often-unnoticed details of daily life" (p. 40).[16] Nevertheless, Sumara's (2002) "troubling bodies" remains a concept largely foreign to common public perceptions of how literature should function within the classroom: "The commonsense discourse of curriculum usually ignores the fact that we are, all-at-once, biological and phenomenological creatures. It does not believe, for example, that what is

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[16] Clearly, Sumara hits upon a tension that has been present in literature classrooms since their inception. Concerns of sedition, blasphemy, or licentiousness have long plagued the consciences of those who would have students encounter only safe and wholly *untroubling* literary fictions; one certainly doesn't have to search far to find extensive lists of books that have been banned from the classroom at various moments in time. The Freedom of Expression Committee of the Book and Periodical Council provides a list of numerous texts that have been challenged in schools, libraries, or bookstores in recent years in Canada.

learned requires that our biological bodies adapt to that learning" (p. 46). Thus, Sumara (2002) reiterates his call for the Commonplace Book and the type of profound engagement with literature that it encourages:

> What can be said about the use of the Commonplace Book as a way to engage with literary texts?…These practices announce a rejection of the essentialist idea that an unmediated and transcendent set of truths about the world exists….As places to work out relationships between familiar and unfamiliar ideas and experiences, Commonplace Book practices help develop conditions for the creating of insight. (pp. 23, 36)

Needless to say, the creation of insight is a goal for all disciplines, all classrooms, and all curricular moments. More importantly, however, the Commonplace Book, as formulated by Sumara (1996, 2002), constitutes a hermeneutic process, wherein students "are not merely trying to describe or explain the immediacy of their involvement with these texts. They are also trying to understand these involvements within the historical and textual contexts of their engagements" (p. 35).[17] As a practice, the Commonplace Book may help alleviate the discomfort I felt both as a teacher and as a supervisor of teachers, for the ways in which it illustrates (and encourages conversation about) a more comprehensive understanding of what happens when we read literature. Farrell (2004) argues that literary

[17] Once again, Sumara's language clearly echoes Gadamer's understanding of *application* as a fundamental component of hermeneutic practice. Beyond this, however, Sumara also seems to be pointing towards Gadamer's (1989/2013) arguments regarding "historically effected consciousness"; specifically, that "we should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work…. Consciousness of being affected by history (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*" (p. 312, emphasis in original).

space is "*truth-revealing"* and that, "[in] reading authors such as Shakespeare and George Eliot, Edward Albee and Henry James, we may have the experience…of having some truth about human interaction emerge from the shadows into light, so that we seem to understand it clearly for the first time" (pp. 11-12). Understood hermeneutically, the "truth" of which Farrell speaks has neither universal, totalizing claims, nor does it suggest a trapped solipsism. Gadamer (1989/2013) reminds us that hermeneutic work "is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness…. *The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*" (p. 306, emphasis in original). Thus, *truth* for Farrell, or *insight* for Sumara, emerges in the dialogic interactions between reader and text, as she applies that which she encounters in literature, continually, reflexively, unavoidably, to the particularity of her own lived context.

**Though This Be Madness, Yet There is Method In't**

**Step one: Systematic improvement and understanding ourselves by analogy.** When I first joined the ranks of the high school English teachers, I selected my words carefully. I was still becoming acquainted with the nature of the courses assigned to me, and was largely unfamiliar with the acronyms and verbal shorthand that flew around the room during the monthly meetings of our professional learning community (PLC). My school district is a rural one and, as a result, most of us were somewhat isolated in that we tended to be the only teacher in our schools who taught our courses. My own career with this division coincided with the inception of a new central office administration team who, in an effort to encourage collaboration and system-wide improvement, implemented the PLC as the central organizing feature of our division. Metaphors were regularly employed to help illustrate the thinking here. It would no longer be acceptable for

teachers to work "as silos," individual and cut off from colleagues who taught the same courses. Furthermore, it was argued, for far too long, parents had played the "teacher lottery" and simply crossed their fingers each September, hoping that their child would land in a *good* teacher's classroom. By working together, consistently, in the form of a PLC, teachers would help each other develop, and net system improvement would result.

The primary mechanism by which we would improve was the comparison of data in the form of common student assessments. Comparing student performance with regard to specific outcomes from the program of studies would presumably reveal trends – patterns, that could be tracked back to individual teachers' performances. The work to align teachers who had traditionally toiled "in isolation" the argument went, was a considerable task. To begin this work, several things needed to happen. Firstly, a common language was required. A common educational vocabulary. We were told that, typically, teachers had been "unconsciously competent" – that is, on the whole, we were competent at our jobs, but couldn't necessarily articulate *why*. We navigated by feel, intuition, trial and error, experience. This was a considerable problem. Who, for instance, would want to see a doctor who practiced in the same way? A doctor who tended to perform well, but couldn't explain her techniques and wasn't familiar with the most current research would be highly suspect. Untrustworthy. These analogies between our profession and the medical field were trotted out regularly, and those who couldn't adequately articulate the latest research might very well be accused of "malpractice." There is great power in such analogies, and in invoking the idea of malpractice. The word suggests very serious professional misconduct, in the very least a profound negligence or incompetence, perhaps even a breach of ethics.

In reflecting upon this experience now, in light of Gadamer's (1989/2013) arguments regarding the colonization of the human sciences by the methods of the natural sciences, it seems painfully clear that the nature of our work with students was not fully and wholly acknowledged for what it is. The fact that we were regularly compared to medical professionals is telling. Such analogies reveal the desire amongst the leaders in our division to see the work of teachers as clinical, akin to the *methodological* and inductive character of research in the natural sciences. In an effort to situate his own work and provide historical background to the development of the human sciences in a post-Enlightenment world, Gadamer (1989/2013) examines "the problem of method" and argues that "the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) so obviously understand themselves by analogy to the natural sciences" (p. 4). For the leaders in our division (and for the designers of the PLC more generally), there was faith in the inductive method. By creating and administering common assessments, collecting data, and comparing results, we would see presumably, which teacher's instructional strategies proved most effective. Once this observation was made, we were to learn and utilize the strategies of the most effective teacher. Gadamer (1989/2013) describes the consequences of adopting such an inductive method within the human sciences: "One does not ascertain causes for particular effects, but simply establishes regularities. Thus it is quite unimportant whether one believes, say, in the freedom of the will or not – one can still make predictions in the sphere of social life" (p. 4).

It was by virtue of such predictions, that we would improve as a school division. Copies of *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) were purchased for

every teacher in the division. By becoming familiar with Marzano's nine strategies, we might finally be able to speak a common language and articulate precisely *which* instructional strategies we were employing in our classes. The book presents nine instructional strategies that, according to Marzano et al. (2001), consistently encourage high-yield results. Once a common language was established, once we were familiar with the most recent research-verified instructional strategies, we would be able to identify and communicate which practices proved most effective. Amassing data regarding student performance (data that ultimately could be traced back to specific instructional strategies) would allow us to understand and *predict* the most effective means of teaching a particular concept or skill to our next class of students. We would reduce the guess-work and proceed forward evermore *methodologically*. And yet, according to Gadamer (1989/2013), "the specific problem that the human sciences present to thought is that one has not rightly grasped their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity" (p. 4):

> The human sciences have no method of their own. Yet one might well ask…, to what extent method is significant in this case and whether the other logical presuppositions of the human sciences are not perhaps far more important than inductive logic. [Hermann] Helmholtz had indicated this correctly when, in order to do justice to the human sciences, he emphasized memory and authority, and spoke of the psychological tact that here replaced the conscious drawing of inferences. What is the basis of this tact? How is it acquired? Does not what is scientific about the human sciences lie rather here than in their methodology? (Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. 7).

To a great extent, this explains what I found so exasperating about the PLC enterprise: in comparing results, and drawing a causational line back to specific strategies, we seemed to be precluding so much of what teaching is. How could we neglect the roles that context might play? Personality? Environmental factors? Personal histories, frustrations, anxieties, ambitions? In choosing not to consider these aspects of teaching, we were neglecting a great deal about the nature of our work with students. Moreover, systems such as those described above, almost certainly constitute what Jardine (2012) considers to be "surveillance and management structures" (p. 79) at work in schools. In such environments, argues Jardine (2012), we require of teachers "the doing of an increasingly narrow and meager task, one that *does not require* initiative but obedience, not only to what is to be done but to precisely how, when and for how long it is to be done" (p. 81, emphasis in original).

Consequently, teachers (in some cases, very *experienced* teachers), are placed into a system in which "things are designed in such a way that it makes no difference that *this* person is here, since the conditions under which those doing the work might have some effect on what occurs has been deliberately and systematically eradicated in the name of efficiency." (Jardine, 2012, p. 81, emphasis in original).[18] In an effort to improve the entire system, our division had traded (and devalued) individual experience and insight, for reliability and system efficiency. Jardine (2012) warns that, as a result of such transactions, "we 'teach to the test' that is now organized around the testing of assembly

[18] Decisions such as these have profound implications, particularly for how we interpret and understand the nature of *experience* in a way quite contrary to Gadamer's explication of *Erfahrung*. I will further develop this idea below.

efficiency and the 'accountability' of teachers is measured by cleaving to this logic" (Jardine, 2012, p. 81).

**Step two: What do we want students to learn?** An important part of the process of developing common assessments was to precisely determine that which we wanted students to learn – that which we presumed to measure. Consequently, as a group, we had been tasked with unpacking or auditing our programs of study, our curriculum. The instructions were ostensibly clear and straightforward. In order to begin this work, we were asked to carefully go through each of our programs of study and identify the essential outcomes – those outcomes that we deemed fundamental to student learning and success within an English Language Arts course.[19] Overwhelmingly, however, what became immediately clear to me, as I sat with this group of very experienced English teachers, was that the Alberta Diploma exam, which students would write at the end of English 30, cast a looming and profound shadow across the entire curriculum, and to a great extent, informed that which we would consider *essential* knowledge and skills for our students, over and above the program of studies itself.

The written component of the exam consists of two parts: the PRT or Personal Response to Texts, and the CRT or Critical/Analytical Response to Texts. Within a three-hour time period, students are asked to respond *personally* to a text they have never encountered before (they have a choice between a poem, a prose excerpt, and an image) and then "switch gears" to respond *critically* or *analytically* to a prompt using a piece of

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[19] The notion that we should identify and focus upon that which is *essential* in our programs of study (and distinguish it from that which is peripheral) is an example of what Jardine (2012) means when he suggests that "we narrow to fix and become thus narrowly fixated, terms that mix together images of repair with those of fastening, securing, pinning down and becoming increasingly uniform and unwavering" (pp. 79-80).

literature they have studied in class.[20] Consequently, a great deal of our time in PLC meetings was spent determining which texts serve students best in preparing for the Diploma. Though the *English Language Arts Program of Studies* does not specify particular texts students must study, there is a long-standing unwritten list of texts that are typically studied in high school, which demonstrate "literary merit," and which are generally thought to serve students well on the Diploma. This list was confirmed for me the first time I travelled to Edmonton to mark Diploma exams. These texts, the "usual suspects," were listed on a piece of purple paper, included in each marker's package of documents. We were to indicate which text each student had chosen to respond with on the exam, by filling in a bubble on the back of the test booklet. Any titles that were not included on the list, would be identified as "other."

"On the Rainy River" by O'Brien (1990/2009) is a popular choice for English 30-1 teachers. The short story, part of a larger collection called *The Things They Carried*, regularly lends itself well to the "critical/analytical response to texts" or CRT portion of the Diploma examination. Though fictional, the story's protagonist and author share the same name and are both drafted to fight in Vietnam.[21] The story is compelling and – I'm sure at one point – was selected for inclusion on English 30 syllabi simply for its literary

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[20] The implications of this switching between responding personally to a piece of literature, and then responding critically, clearly demonstrates part of the larger problem in literature classrooms more generally. Both modes of responding (personally and critically) have important and divergent implications. Switching between the two is undoubtedly disorienting for students within a high stakes exam setting, but more importantly also suggests a disregard on the part of the exam designers for the ways in which teachers might counsel students to engage with literature.

[21] In fact, there appear to be at least three "Tim O'Briens" students must negotiate when reading and speaking about the text: O'Brien-the-author, O'Brien-the-young-protagonist, and O'Brien-the-middle-aged-narrator who reflects upon his experiences as a young American soldier drafted to fight in the Vietnam War.

merit. Over time, however, "On the Rainy River" has become one of "the usual suspects" on the marking floor in Edmonton. Teacher-markers can count on the fact that the story will be well represented in the thousands of student responses generated by the exam every January and June. Aside from the fact that O'Brien's writing is moving and challenging, the story itself centers on a moral dilemma, a critical and defining moment in the life of the protagonist, and it is for this reason that the story works so well as a text for students to analyze in response to most any prompt found on the biannual iterations of the English Diploma exam. It is perhaps not surprising that teachers and teacher-markers who read this story with students over multiple semesters should look for increasingly effective ways for students to write about the text, but the fact that this story has come to serve as a reliable tool for Diploma preparation severely undermines its merits as a literary text and its potential for profound student engagement. Knowing the form, parameters, and constraints of the exam, teachers tend to prepare students to write concisely (and superficially) about the story's basic plot and the protagonist's internal struggle, rather than for its true value, which lies in its ambiguity, how it blurs the lines between fact and fiction, and in what it suggests about truth and aesthetic experience. The story is more properly and fully understood in its place amongst the other chapters of *The Things They Carried*. In fact, we catch a glimpse of this more clearly in another story from the collection, entitled "How to Tell a True War Story," in which O'Brien-the-narrator says,

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed…. The picture gets

> jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed* (O'Brien, 1990/2009, p. 71, emphasis in original).

The fact that the author, narrator, and young protagonist all share a name provides a difficult ambiguity for readers as they navigate the text. The ambiguity is amplified due to multiple shifts in time, the reader working to follow the course of events. In "On the Rainy River," for example, O'Brien-the-protagonist experiences a vision on the border between Canada and the United States as he contemplates whether or not to dodge the draft and flee his country. From a small rowboat, O'Brien-the-protagonist observes people from his past as well as his future lining both banks, standing in judgment. There is no clear indication in the story to cue the reader as to the nature of O'Brien's experience in this moment. At what point have we slipped into reverie? Which of his possible futures does this vision represent? Will this course of events come true, or might his life follow a different path? Consequently, in my experience of teaching the story, students are always initially frustrated in trying to understand what is "real" and what isn't. Zooming out to O'Brien-the-author's entire project, we see a fundamental ambiguity in that we can never be sure as to what constitutes fact and what constitutes fiction. O'Brien-the-author did indeed serve in Vietnam as a young man. To what extent is he drawing upon actual experiences? What is true here? How should we classify this piece of writing? Returning again to "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien-the-narrator offers the following:

> You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, "Is it true?" and if the answer matters, you've got your answer…. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. (O'Brien, 1990/2009, p. 83)

Because the line between memoir and fiction is blurred, the reader must continually work to interpret that which she encounters. The ground is constantly shifting, and as such, O'Brien's text assuredly constitutes what Landy (2012a) would designate a "formative fiction," a text

> whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities. Rather than providing knowledge per se – whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation – what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they do is *train*. They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are. (p. 10)

The fact that this story has come to serve a relatively simple and utilitarian purpose in Alberta high schools is disappointing, given the nature and potential of the story to contribute to the formative development of its readers. Jardine (2012) articulates this impulse, a regular occurrence in high school literature classrooms: all too often "we look to the author to tell us the 'real meaning' of the text…. We call out to the author to save us from the task of interpreting the questions that the work itself places *us* under" (p. 153. emphasis in original). The work in this case very much questions its reader. We are

tasked with interpreting the nature of memory and of truth in story, continually disrupted by a shifting narrative perspective. In neglecting to work through these questions, we short-circuit the power and potential of such a *formative* text.

In his 2008 collection of essays entitled *Maps and Legends*, Pullitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon considers the nature of the reader-writer relationship in a piece entitled, "Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story." Chabon, a staunch defender of so-called "genre-fiction" makes the case that "entertainment has a bad name" and that "serious people learn to mistrust and even to revile it" (Chabon, 2008, p. 13). More broadly understood, however, the word "entertainment" has a richer and more productive meaning, argues Chabon: "It suggests a kind of midair transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridgeheads" (p. 15). Chabon acknowledges Lewis Hyde's (1998/2008) *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* as an important piece of writing that informs his thinking about the reader-writer relationship: "Trickster is always associated with borders, no man's lands, with crossroads and intersections. Trickster is the conveyer of souls across ultimate boundaries, the transgressor of heaven, the reconciler of opposites" (Chabon, 2008, p. 24). Trickster of course (*hermeneus* or Hermes in Greek mythology), lives at the heart of hermeneutic practice. Hyde (1998/2008) elaborates:

> The name Hermes once meant 'he of the stone heap,' which tells us that the [roadside] cairn is more than a trail marker – it is an altar to the forces that govern these spaces of heightened uncertainty, and to the intelligence needed to negotiate

> them. Hitchhikers who make it safely home have somewhere paid homage to Hermes. (p. 6)

The hitchhiker, the traveller, the venturer – texts such as O'Brien's (when given the time and attention they deserve) have great potential for students, for in their "spaces of heightened uncertainty," we must journey (*fahren)*, and in doing so, we hit upon Gadamer's (1989/2013) understanding of the experience (*Erfahrung*) induced by a work of art "which does not leave him who has it unchanged" (p. 91).

In returning to the question asked of the teachers in my PLC – *What do you want students to learn*? – it becomes increasingly apparent the extent to which a positivist instrumentalism has informed my work with students in the classroom. That is, I have understood my work *by* analogy to the natural sciences, rather than for what it is – a fundamentally human endeavor. Developing and administering common assessments provided the teachers in my division with easy-to-measure data. Consequently, far too frequently in my practice, I have short-circuited students' journeying in favor of encouraging a relatively simple ability to compose a clean and formulaically prescribed written response to a piece of literature. Ostensibly, the system (of teaching) improves through this work. And yet, what about the formative *experiences* of our students? Should we not instead ask of ourselves: *How do we want students to be? In what places should we journey?*

**Wayfinding**

The final course handed to me as a seconded teacher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge in the Summer term of this year, was Education 2500. This course, a prerequisite for anyone seeking admission to the Faculty, is by definition

an opportunity for prospective teachers to gauge the appropriateness of a future in K-12 education. For those who register in the course, it is often the first chance they will have, as an adult, to be in a classroom with the intent of closely observing a little of a teacher's life. Though their role with students in the classroom is minimal, students in this course are granted an opportunity to gain insight into the nature of teaching, and determine whether or not this is a profession they should continue to pursue. Most students who have a positive experience in the course, and meet all curricular requirements, will go on to apply to the Faculty. Regularly, however, a few students will successfully complete all requirements of the course, have a positive experience in their practicum placement, and yet decide at the end of the term, that they wish to pursue studies in another realm. Still others, from time to time, will discover through the work of the course, that they are unfit for teaching, at least at this point in their lives. In each of these cases, the course itself has served its purpose. It has granted would-be teachers an *experience*, an opportunity to consider the suitability of this profession for their own lives.

Throughout the on-campus portion of the course, I provided my students with several opportunities to reflect on the question, "Why teaching?" In reviewing their responses, I often encountered very similar accounts, built strongly on clichés that dwell within the world of education. An incredible number of responses recalled the magic of "seeing a student's eyes light up" in a moment of understanding, or other similar "lightbulb" moments during their time in practicum. Such accounts, in their reliance upon cliché and stock-narratives, were bland and unconvincing. Much stronger, were those written reflections that highlighted a specific autobiographical moment in the student's experience (perhaps from as far adrift as their own childhood) that served to illustrate

their thinking and motivation to teach. The fact that these accounts were more compelling is perhaps not surprising, but it does suggest something about the nature of experience. These students were, by virtue of their enrollment in the course, *inexperienced* in the world of teaching, and yet each had, of course, a wealth of experience within classrooms throughout their lives. Sumara (2002) relates similar encounters with preservice teachers who often arrive in his education classes with the preconceived notion that "good teaching emerges from strong management skills or from an unconditional love of students" (pp. 59-60). Consequently, Sumara (2002) argues for the importance of having students in teacher education classes write autobiographical narratives and, in doing so, recognize "how the specific narratives that emerge from our experiences, in large measure, influence these identities" (p. 60):

> Not only does this activity help them to understand that experience is much more complex than any language that can be used to represent it, but, as well, it gives them an opportunity to deliberately and explicitly create stories that function as one of the technologies that shape their own experience of self identity. Of course, writing these narratives is more than just an act of representing their identities. It is a productive act of creating them. (pp. 62-63)

Fowler (2006) explores this phenomenon critically and compellingly within the context of narrative research and, in characterizing the initial stages of her own analysis (her "naïve storying"), she writes: "Just by writing out the difficulty as a story for the first time, I am changed. I am affected by the stories I tell, and I notice others are too" (p. 37). Autobiographical narratives, for both Sumara and Fowler, serve as a mechanism by which student-teachers and teachers alike might think carefully and analytically through

an experience, what it suggests, how it motivates, harms, inhibits, instigates, troubles, or in any other way affects their lives and careers. More importantly, however, is the apparent potential of such experiential storying to aid in the *formation* of an intellectual identity.

It is this topic of experience and *becoming experienced*, upon which I would now turn my interpretive gaze. In wrestling with the question "Why are we reading this?", and in coming to understand how I might respond, I have endeavored to understand how to *be* a worthwhile English teacher, how to be someone worthy of journeying with students through difficult, complex, and challenging literary texts. And so, finally, it comes to this question of experience. What does it mean to become an experienced teacher? This question comes at a particularly striking moment for me, in that I have been responsible for supervising a number of preservice teachers in their practicum placements this year. Though our conversations often focused on the specific unfolding of a lesson or the nature of a student-teacher interaction, in all cases, we were talking about their work with the understanding that they were working to *become experienced*. It is an interesting thing to consider the development of student-teachers, and the institutions and ministries that educate, authorize, and license them. We have forms for observing their growth at each stage of their development. Student-teachers must progressively demonstrate more sophisticated and comprehensive skills in each semester and practicum placement. These forms continue into their career, as principals and administrators evaluate and provide feedback on their work. In the school I spent my formative teaching years, this form was printed on yellow paper. It detailed a wide variety of "high-yield instructional strategies," according to current publications from contemporary researchers conducting meta-

analyses of thousands of studies. All teachers in the building, regardless of experience, context, or teaching assignment, would be observed and ultimately evaluated by virtue of their demonstrating such strategies in their classrooms. These forms are crude instruments for encouraging and charting a teacher's experience and developing skills; there is a troubling tension between the need for such forms, which attempt to universalize and authorize what makes for an experienced and effective teacher, and the nature of experience itself. Those who fulfill each section and earn checkmarks for each requisite skill are "stamped" with approval. An experienced teacher, ostensibly, fulfills each category.

In reflecting on the nature of experience (*Erfahrung)*, Gadamer (1989/2013) argues that the very concept itself remains incredibly obscure: "Because [experience] plays an important role in the natural sciences in the logic of induction, it has been subjected to an epistemological schematization that, for me, truncates its original meaning" (p. 355). Gadamer (1989/2013) speaks of the need to validate findings through a process of objectification, such that "these basic experiences can be repeated by anyone" (p. 355). This idea of replicability clearly informs the types of teacher-evaluation tools we create, right down to the tidy check-boxes beside each component skill or piece of observable evidence. Gadamer (1989/2013) explains, "Just as in the natural sciences experiences must be verifiable, so also must the whole process be capable of being checked in the human sciences also" (p. 355). And yet, such replicability and verifiability contradict the nature of experience itself, and threaten to close it off from the next instance or moment. Jardine (2012) argues, "becoming experienced…is not had through cutting ourselves off from this difficult, convivial life, and becoming some autonomous

fantasy-self, some abstract 'I am'" (p. 96). Rather, argues Jardine (2012), we must acknowledge that

> new knowledge does not amass but rather, so to speak, always accrues to *someone*. It is always *someone* who is becoming experienced, and no one can become experienced on someone else's behalf. This is in the nature of our convivial knowledge of the convivial world, that it is a knowledge we have learned to live with, and we are not replaceable with each other in this learning. As such, each of us has an irreplaceable part in this convivial whole. (p. 127)

Jardine's (2012) thinking here, directly echoes Gadamer's (1989/2013) own examination of the nature of experience, in which he suggests that:

> Experience is always actually present only in the individual observation. It is not known in a previous universality. Here lies the fundamental openness of experience to new experience, not only in the general sense that errors are corrected, but that experience is essentially dependent on constant confirmation and necessarily becomes a different kind of experience where there is no confirmation. (p. 360)

Understood this way (that is, preserving a regard for the *next* instance, the *individual* observation), the concept of experience profoundly affects how I interpret the practice of teaching, and especially the ways in which I might teach, observe, supervise, and evaluate preservice teachers. Sumara (2002) rightly suggests that "good teaching is not simply a matter of incorporating good management skills, loving one's students, or being well organized…. What must be in place,…is a particular understanding of the complex ways in which *what is learned* becomes woven into *who one is* and, as well, how one's

personal biography is influential to how one interacts with new learning" (p. 68, emphasis in original). This is no easy task, and assuredly *complicates* the conversation (Pinar, 2006) around what it means to become an *experienced* teacher. And yet, despite this inherent difficulty, I am heartened by such complicating, for in it I perceive an opening-up, a space for the individual voice that need not remain mute and ultimately deferential to the eclipsing shadow of endless data. Fowler (2006) articulates the spirit of hermeneutics that always and already lives at the heart of this work:

> The task that faced Hermes also faces post/modern educators everywhere, as messengers of society's curriculum to its youth, of the wise to their innocents. That task requires linguistic competence, excellent communication, lucid discourse, and profound understanding as we position ourselves as translators and questioners of human meaning and interpretation across all disciplines. (p. 120)

Teacher-as-interpreter, teacher-as-messenger. We sit in the interstitial spaces. Characterized in this way, the skills, tact, and sensitivity required of an experienced teacher highlight how woefully inadequate and largely inappropriate are the tools we rely upon to evaluate, certify, and encourage growth within teachers. In their very structure, their fondness for columns, checkboxes, and assumed universal applicability, they encourage an ossification. Experience is treated as a foregone conclusion; it fits within prescribed categories. In the previous chapter, I drew an analogy between experience – *Erfahrung* – and the Polynesian wayfinders as described in Davis's (2009) Massey Lectures. I believe the metaphor of *wayfinding* is helpful for the present discussion in that it highlights an empowering orientation to new experience. For the wayfinder, past experience is helpful only insofar as it encourages a readiness to encounter the *next*

experience. Moreover, in *becoming experienced*, the wayfinder must navigate unknown waters, carefully and continually paying attention to the nuances of the present moment and environment – it would be far too perilous not to.

**Cultivating an Openness to New Experience**

My wife and I took our second daughter into our municipal medical centre a few days ago for her two-month vaccinations. The registered nurse who administered the vaccines, first took us through the litany of possible side-effects associated with each inoculation, printed and colour-coded on a laminated form, so that we would be aware of all possible risks before proceeding. Some of these were mild, and could be treated at home with over-the-counter medications. Others were far more serious and would require immediate and emergency medical attention. I am sure she recognized in our faces what she registered in the faces of all parents as they listen to the listed possible effects. In an effort to calm fears or alleviate undue anxiety, she punctuated almost every bullet point with a reassuring, "but that so very *rarely* occurs." Nevertheless, it was important for us to be aware of the signs and symptoms of these possible complications in our daughter so that we might respond swiftly, should the need arise. I found it a strange moment, sitting there in the nurse's station, firmly holding my daughter's thigh prone, such that the nurse could administer the first of two grim looking needles. I knew that countless laboratory trials had deemed the vaccines safe, and that the benefits of their administration vastly outstripped the odds of possible complications. And yet that did not absolve us from our responsibility to watch, very carefully, how *our* daughter responded to the treatment. We were, in fact, to monitor her *more carefully* in the minutes and hours following the vaccinations, than we typically would, keenly alert for any suspicious symptoms.

Standard policy requires that infants and their parents stay within the nurse's station for a full 15 minutes after the vaccine, should the need arise for immediate medical intervention in the case of an unanticipated reaction. Having passed the 15-minute mark without exhibiting any nefarious symptoms, our daughter was deemed fit to return home where we would continue to closely monitor her condition for the next several hours.

I am careful in relating this experience, for I do not wish to further any analogies between teaching and medical science, nor do I wish to suggest in any way that teaching might be considered akin to administering a vaccination (a troubling number of darkly comic quips immediately come to mind). Furthermore, I am aware of the ways in which disciplines within the human sciences have problematically co-opted methodologies from the natural sciences in the course of their work, as Gadamer (1989/2013) discusses, and as I have considered above. Rather, I include this experience because it positions "amassed data" within an appropriate role when we consider the nature of experience. That is, the knowledge we gain from repeated trials would seem to indicate a tendency or a likelihood of what to expect. Knowing such information can indeed be helpful (in alleviating undue anxiety, for instance), and yet, as in the case with our daughter, it unquestionably *does not* absolve us from the responsibility of keenly watching as we proceed into this particular case, the *next* case, for we may indeed observe something different, something that requires immediate attention. "We always need to watch carefully," our nurse told us, "because we just don't know who that one-in-a-million baby will be."

Jardine (1998) considers at length Gadamer's phrase, "the fecundity of the individual case" and argues that within the realm of educational research, we too often

forego "speaking and writing of the resonant *meaning*" of an event "in favor of an inquiry into whether a significant *number* of 'respondents' will cite the same experiences" (p. 38). Hermeneutic interpretation, argues Jardine (1998), suggests "that there is a 'truth' to be had, an understanding to be reached, in the provocative, unmethodical incidents of our lives, a truth which is despoiled and thus left out of consideration by the methodical severances requisite of empirical work" (p. 39). How might I become more attuned to the "resonant meanings" of that which I encounter? How might I encourage such a sensitivity in my student-teachers? Consider, especially, the context within which new teachers operate, as described by Fowler (2006):

> In the beginning of life and the beginning of (student) teaching, things happen to us. We are often passive beings within an educational hierarchy, with choice only about our attitude toward the events that occur from day to day. We plan classes but rarely, if ever, are they lived as planned. We encounter students, curriculum, the business of school. More things happen. We perceive, take in, and (re)member incidents. (pp. 37-38)

Fowler's (2006) staccato description powerfully captures my own experience of teaching. Numerous encounters – with "students, curriculum, the business of school" – call for my attention as I navigate the bells, class schedules, and hallway-discussions of a teaching day. The pulse of school is frenetic and too many days end with a nagging feeling that I have neglected a loose thread. Many loose threads. They were there, somewhere. I noticed something. What was it? I can't remember. There isn't enough time anyway. The mission statements, initiatives, administration-directed professional reading and professional development occlude and muffle the whispering moments from my day.

There is much more *author*/ity in the shiny book of "research-based instructional strategies" that was placed in my staff mailbox, than in the scattered, nascent inquiries sitting in the back of my head. Should this equal experience? After working in such an environment for a year, five, ten, will I *become experienced*?

Jardine (2012) suggests that, "even under conditions of threat and retrenchment," a hermeneutic inquiring may be possible (p. 95). And yet, he warns, "There is no universal hope here…, no ensuring methodology, and there is certainly nothing inevitable about becoming experienced in the ways of the world and what such experience might bring" (p. 95). The hermeneutic consciousness, Gadamer (1989/2013) reminds us, "culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma" (p. 370). For Gadamer, in order for us to understand *readiness for experience*, we must acknowledge the hermeneutic "priority of the question" (p. 370), and it is for this reason that he turns to the model of the platonic dialectic:

> As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further – i.e., the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue. (p. 375)

If, in becoming experienced, I hope to preserve an openness to *new experience* (rather than calcifying and becoming increasingly dogmatic), I must recognize the priority of the question, for as Gadamer (1989/2013) argues,

> To ask a question means to bring it into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined, awaiting a decisive answer. The significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned. It has to be brought into this state of indeterminacy, so that there is an equilibrium between pro and contra…. Every true question requires this openness. Without it, it is basically no more than an apparent question. (pp. 371-372)

One of the experiences my colleagues and I arranged for our Education 2500 students this past semester was a trip to a local art gallery, which was exhibiting a large display of student artwork from around the city. Beyond seeing an example of the intersections between schools and community, we hoped that our student-teachers would consider more broadly the possibilities (and implications) of art education outside of the traditional walls of a school. During our time in the gallery, we were fortunate enough to have one of the curators explain her thinking and the manner in which she went about designing this year's student-art exhibit. She was new to the gallery and spoke about her exasperation at much of what was turned in by schools, for possible display. "These…are the llamas," she told us, "well, a small sampling. Putting five in a row is my little subversive protest. I mean…how many fucking llamas do we need in an art gallery?" A ripple of laughter swept through our group; we were charmed by the curator's enthusiasm and fierce defense of what students might produce if given the chance. Standing with that group of prospective teachers, and hearing the art director's criticisms pulled into high relief how peculiar a lot of the work we do with students truly is. She found the llamas distasteful. Too many to be submitted by teachers all across the city (presumably making

a wooden connection between the Grade 3 Social Studies and Art curricula), most of the llamas had to be left in folders, not displayed. She preserved a space on the wall for five of them. Her curatorial protest.

In displaying these five nearly identical pictures of llamas, she was protesting the way art was being treated in these classrooms. They were not art. They were not representative of what art should be. They were a set of instructions followed. They were, in the most generous terms, an exercise. I wondered, did students ask of their teachers why they were painting llamas? In this moment, the student question that has lived at the heart of my thesis – *why are we reading this?* – pulsed strongly once again. Once exasperated by it, I am thankful for its persistence in my teaching life. This is a question I have come to see as fruitful, important. It is voiced by a student *encountering* something and signalling a willingness to engage in a conversation. It is a moment ripe for the work of hermeneutics, for interpretation. It is an important question worthy of investigation *by* students and *with* students. It is a question to which I must openly attend, anew, each time it is voiced. As Jardine (2012) suggests, "Coming to understand these matters as a matter of profound delicacy and contingency, always in need of being revived and renewed, is at the heart of hermeneutic work" (p. 95). Encouragingly, he adds, "understanding our suffering just might help ameliorate it. It might help us flourish…. Its fragile hope lies in the good of becoming experienced in the ways of the world and becoming someone in the process (Jardine, 2012, p. 95).

## Chapter 5: Implications for Reading and Teaching Practices

Originally, in setting out on this journey, I sought an answer to a question that had persistently troubled me throughout my entire career as a literature teacher. It seemed somewhat of an embarrassment that I could not adequately respond to students when they asked of me, "Why are we reading this?" Though I fumbled for different answers in each case, I knew that neither my students, nor I myself, were ultimately satisfied with my responses. And so, the question persisted. To complicate matters, there never seemed to be enough time to truly consider such an esoteric question with my students. We lived and operated in a system that encouraged efficiency and data-driven improvement. The calendar was restrictive and questions that required philosophical pondering were not typically welcomed or deemed important when considered alongside the more concrete and immediate concerns of a day in school with students. As a result, this question – and my unexamined anxiety around it – lay quietly pulsing at the heart of my teaching each day. My students and I operated on a profound assumption: whatever we happened to be reading was indeed a worthy text – it warranted student attention and thought. Why? Let's not worry about that for now. The important business of *learning* lay ahead. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, I should acknowledge the spirit of restlessness that unsettled my teaching and very presence in the classroom – a feeling which ultimately led to my enrolment in this graduate program. From my present standpoint, I can see evidence of dissatisfaction and unsettledness throughout my career; thankfully, it has ignited a wandering spirit within me. As Jardine (2012) suggests, in thinking hermeneutically, I "become drawn out into a world, 'summoned'…out of the confines of my restless self and my 'experiences' (*Erlebenisse)* into a venture

(*Erfahrung)*" (Jardine, 2012, p. 78). The final pages of a study such as this suggest a natural point of reflection, a time to formally speak to that which has been *uncovered*, and because the work presented here has indeed constituted a profound journeying, I would like to consider the way I have come – to acknowledge retrospectively the path I have forged up to this point in and through wrestling with this question.

**Inheriting Incoherence: Re-entering the Classroom**

> *Questioning too is more a passion than an action. A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion*.
>
> – Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. 375

Interestingly, as I researched and wrote this year, I was granted a reprieve from the literature classroom. Having accepted a secondment to the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, I have been teaching in realms more directly related to pedagogy than to reading fiction. At this moment, however, I am poised to re-enter the classroom and resume once again the practice of teaching (with) literature. I know the tensions that I left remain in place and that, upon my return, I will once again wrestle with the difficulty of teaching within a system that preserves and validates high-stakes examinations. I know that I will once again inhabit the awkward space wherein teachers and students alike inherit contradictory messages about what it means to engage with a literary text. Moreover, I know that I will encounter, sit with, and speak to students who have yet to voice their own unique challenges to the course materials, the readings I will integrate, into my courses. Nevertheless, I take heed in the fact that I have journeyed. I am encouraged by the ways in which my thinking has changed in my time away. I set out to answer, definitively and satisfactorily, why we read what we do in schools. In journeying through this question, I have come to understand that, rather than an answer, I

seek a disposition. I could not have been more disappointed in observing the asphyxiation I saw in certain classrooms this year. There were far too few challenges to course reading material. Only a meek acceptance – the acceptance of the conquered. When students demand an answer of their teachers and mentors, we observe evidence of life, the beginning of a *productive* struggle to understand. Gadamer (1989/2013) reminds us that "We who are attempting to understand must ourselves make [the text] speak" (p. 385). This is why Sumara (2002) argues for the importance of reading fiction together *with* one's students:

> I learned early in my teaching that these shared oral readings created important pedagogical opportunities. By thinking out loud with students about my responses to particular characters and situations in the novels I read to them, I invited them to participate with me in the development of ideas. As opposed to much of their school experience that only presented ideas that were, apparently, already fixed and certain, these shared reading activities demonstrated that ideas and identities are always in process. (p. 58)

The real work, of course, *begins* here. As Sumara (2002) counsels, "In order for literature to matter in school, [we must create] conditions for people to learn to be surprised by what might happen if they dedicated themselves to literary practices that require a sustained engagement with someone else's structure of thinking" (p. 160). Therefore, despite the difficulties I know I will encounter in resuming my place within the high school classroom, I understand a way in which I may move forward. Conditions I may work to create and a disposition I may hope to cultivate: there is important work to be done, and this is truly heartening.

**The World of Practice**

> *Good interpretive work should disclose something about the meaningful existence of the interpreter and the world.*
>
> – Moules et al, 2015, p. 119

The contours of the present piece of writing began to take shape when I was introduced to the hermeneutic tradition as it has been taken up by educational researchers. Originally, I was drawn to hermeneutics because it seemed to provide an alternative to the polarities of literary theory as it has typically been adopted within the high school classroom. I appreciated that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics somewhat reconciled the extremities of Reader Response theory and the more formalist New Critical tendencies, which both live vestigially and combatively in the classroom. Thus, the first significant aspect of my work was to read *Truth and Method* in an effort to identify key features of Gadamer's hermeneutics, such that I might more fully understand a way forward, a way to handle and teach (with) literature *coherently*. While this remains a significant feature of the present work, I found that in studying the tradition of hermeneutics I have come to appreciate the character of interpretive studies more generally, particularly with regard to the ways in which it may be taken up to examine the work of practice disciplines such as teaching. This is what allowed and encouraged me to produce the second major feature of this project: an examination not only of how I might teach (with) literature, but of the very context in which I have lived and functioned *as* a teacher, the tensions and difficulties of a life in a public-school classroom, amidst the various issues that pull in so many different directions.

There is a humility in hermeneutics: in becoming experienced, we properly recognize the finitude and fallibility of our own interpreting, we acknowledge that "we

are not all-comprehending masters of the world (nor can become so)" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 45). And yet, somewhat paradoxically, I have been encouraged by the *empowering* character of hermeneutic study, for it acknowledges the voice of the individual practitioner and asks us to attend to the nuances and idiosyncrasies of our own lived experiences. In characterizing hermeneutic research, Moules et al. (2015) highlight its "focus on a particular topic in relation to how it is lived out in *the world of practice*, how it has evolved over time, how it relates to the surrounding culture, and what it means to the practitioners involved" (p. 117, emphasis added). By examining specific episodes of my own experience as a teacher – within the classroom, with colleagues, and with preservice teachers – I have sought to do just this. Importantly too, we should acknowledge the ethical dimension of hermeneutic work:

> It is a call that addresses us in the first person: What can I do for this child or this patient, in this situation, at this particular time to help them flourish? What can I learn from this patient or child that will help me strengthen my own practice? What can I add to the larger conversation, in the discipline, that might help us see, think about, act differently toward the phenomenon? (Moules et al., 2015, p. 58)

The perennial and ongoing requirement that we attend to the individual instance, *the next case*, is ultimately what I find most important and affirming about this work, and has contributed to my greatest insight in puzzling through this practice of teaching. A hermeneutic consciousness "must be awakened and kept awake" (Gadamer, 1989/2013, p. xxxv). Thus, to conclude (from Latin *concludere*, "to shut up, enclose") seems antithetical to the spirit and character of hermeneutics itself. Crucially, "the truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience" (Gadamer, 1989/2013,

p. 364); as such, the only conclusion I can offer is in fact a resolution to remain alert and attentive to that which I encounter tomorrow.

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