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Questioning the Value of Literacy

A Phenomenology of Speaking and Reading in Children

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It may seem odd, in a handbook that studies and celebrates the written word for children, to include a chapter that attends to the losses involved in the child's acquisition of traditional literacy. But as we are reminded in Betsy Hearne's essay, our first introduction to literature is through oral stories; thus we need to consider what it means that our young readers were first speakers and listeners, and how that transformation from orality to literature fundamentally changes perceptual frameworks. Phenomenologist Eva-Maria Simms asks readers to consider the embodied contexts of language use in children and how these contexts change with the advent of alphabetic literacy. Such understanding can help us discern what's at stake for the "reluctant readers" we encounter in our classrooms, as well as in Campano's and Ghiso's discussions of immigrant children learning to read books from cultures other than their own, or in the arguments Bradford highlights surrounding the inscription of indigenous narratives.

Reading as Technology

The Chirographic Bias

Reading and writing seem to be harmless, innocuous skills, mere addenda to the basket of natural skills that children develop throughout their formative years. At least, this is the impression promoted by handbooks and research reports on early childhood education (Spodek, 1993; National Reading Panel, 2000; Hall, Larson, & Marsh, 2003; Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). The contributions by psychologists consist of discussions of cognitive/information processing abilities, memory strategies, Piagetian

stages, and Vygotskian proximal zones—all presented as part of the cognitive/developmental scaffolding that makes learning to read possible. But how does the acquisition of literacy affect the child's consciousness? There is a surprising silence on this topic. Even among authors who are critical of the power relations in the educational system (Burman, 1994; Canella, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997; Soto, 1999) the value of reading *per se* is rarely questioned. One of the few instances where the value of literacy is problematized occurs in the clash between indigenous cultures and the U.S. education system: The Native American Cochiti people have

denied the transcription of their language into alphabetic notation and refused to have the written language taught to their children in schools (Martinez, 2000).

Our mainstream cultural belief in the desirability of literacy is what the phenomenological tradition calls a "natural attitude" (Husserl, 1952): Everyday phenomena are accepted without question and the opportunity for reflection does not arise. The phenomenological method attempts to bracket or suspend the unquestioned belief in the obviousness of what is given to our experience, and the researcher *suspends assent* (Gurwitsch, 1974). This withholding of assent does not mean that the *phenomenon* is suspended, merely that the researcher creates openness for a deeper exploration of what is there (Ihde, 1979). Husserl's (1969) call "to the things themselves" (pp. 12–13) is a challenge to direct our attention more fully to what phenomena themselves can disclose through a process of faithful description. What was taken for granted before appears now as strange and interesting. Phenomenology is a philosophical method that, by suspending assent, awakens wonder (Held, 2002).

The intent of this chapter is to suspend the belief in the goodness of literacy—our *chirographic bias*—in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the engagement with texts structures human consciousness, and particularly the minds of children. In the following pages, literacy (a term which in this chapter refers to the ability to read and produce written text) is discussed as a consciousness altering *technology*. A phenomenological analysis of the act of reading shows the child's engagement with texts as a *perceptual* as well as a *symbolic* event that builds upon but also alters children's speech acts. Speaking and reading are both forms of language use, but with different configurations of perceptual and symbolic qualities. Children's literature uses textual technology and, intentionally or not, participates in structuring children's pre-literate minds. Some of its forms, such as picture books and early readers, are directly intended to bridge the gap between the pre-literate listener and the literate reader and ease the transition into the literate state. It is my hope that the phenomenological analysis of the experiences of speaking and reading might help us understand more clearly how children's literature impacts the minds of children. Such an analysis can awaken a critical awareness of the power that letters wield as they shape the reader's psychological reality, and it can sharpen our sense of wonder about the metamorphosis of language from speaking to writing.

The question of the value of literacy is not an academic issue for me. As a parent and as a teacher of parents and therapists, I am often confronted with the issue of what children (and the society as a whole) *lose* by taking on literacy. One day my eight-year-old son and I wandered through the glass rooms of the botanical conservatory. Hundreds of plant species lined the banks of our path, spilled down from baskets, pots, and ledges, reached through the humid air towards the glass-filtered sunlight

or the shade of their companions. I tried to read as many identification tags as I could, but Nick was more interested in the markers for the treasure hunt, which the staff had hidden among the roots. He did not like reading. We entered a long glass room which was lined with a dozen topiaries representing Aesop's fables. Assuming that this could be a "teachable moment," I stopped before the first one, and told Nick that this was the fable of the fox and the stork and started to tell him the story. "You left out the good parts," he interrupted me, and proceeded to recite Aesop's tale from beginning to end. Then he rushed to the next topiary, and, standing before the exhibit, declaimed the next fable, exactly with the wording and intonation of his second grade teacher. And the next one. And the next one. At the end of the hallway he had told me six fables, metered and formulaic, with coherent plots, interesting details, and varied voices for the animal protagonists. I marveled at his ability to remember. Here was a child who recalled the words of a teacher verbatim. And he could not read.

This rhapsodic feat of memory, which recalls lengthy story lines and the details of content and delivery, is typical of pre-literate, oral people (Goody, 1968). Memory changes when people learn to read, and Nicholas was no exception: His recall prowess fell by the wayside a few years after he became literate. I have always wondered what other abilities of our children's perception, imagination, feeling, and cognition we have sacrificed when we taught them how to read.

Textuality as Technology

Literacy is deeply entwined with the structures of human consciousness, and it changes the culture that embraces it, as well as the individual who learns how to read. This has been documented by historians and philologists (Eisenstein, 1979; Havelock, 1982; Parry, 1971) as well as authors with a historical and cultural interest in anthropology (Goody, 1968), psychology (Luria, 1976; Ong, 1982), education (Egan, 1988; Sumara, 1998), and communication (McCluhan, 1962; Postman, 1994). On the cultural level, the phenomenon of textual literacy appears in sharper outline when it is contrasted with the literary and educational practices of oral cultures, which transmit their knowledge and traditions without texts, or with cultures that have pockets of literacy practices that are very different from our own.

Illich and Sanders (1988) have argued that alphabetization, i.e., the translation of the phonetic sound system into visual alphabetic notation, is an epistemological practice with far-reaching impact on mind and culture.¹ Illich (1996) has traced the creation of the "bookish" (p. 5) mind to the monastic reading and writing tradition of the 12th century, which built the foundation for new thinking practices, the founding of schools and universities, and the dissemination of ideas through the printing press in

the following centuries. Reading is a mind-technology. The word "technology" is generally defined as the application of tools and methods, particularly the study, development, and application of devices, machines, and techniques for manufacturing and productive processes. On a deeper level, however, technology is the disclosure and manipulation of the essence of things (Heidegger, 1993). Technologies extract the essences out of human abilities by instrumentalizing them and by depriving them of their original lived context. An example is the invention of the automobile: The essential ability of human movement is extracted and intensified through the technology of the car, which, in turn, reduces the lived and embodied context of human motility. When we sit in the speeding car, our senses are insulated from the heat, smell, and touch of the places we pass, and we do not notice their details anymore. The adoption of automobile technology, in turn, has required changes in infrastructure, which have deeply altered the landscapes and social fabric of American cities. According to Illich (1996), when human experience becomes technologized, a double process of intensification of some experiential elements and the de-contextualization *and* reduction of others can be observed. Literacy as a technology extracts the essence out of human speech—the content of what is said—and instrumentalizes and intensifies it through the process of alphabetic notation and textual practices. The lived context of oral language is reduced and restructured. In the following sections we will trace this process of reduction and intensification as language becomes written text.

Introducing literacy into non-literate cultures has had profound effects on their cultural practices (Eisenstein, 1979; Goody, 1968; McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1982). Some of the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, as we saw above, have refused to allow their languages to be written and taught in schools as recently as the 1990s. They argue that written language is sacrilegious, gives indiscriminate access to esoteric religious practice, and is an imperialist tool that undermines the cultural identity and political sovereignty of Pueblo peoples (Martinez, 2000; Webster, 2006). This echoes Ong's (1982) statement that "writing is a particularly pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself..." (p. 12).

The Phenomenology of the Speech Act

A Visit to the Kindergarten

Pre-literate children engage in language all the time, and their oral culture and the variety of the language forms they use is surprisingly sophisticated. It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the research in the field of language acquisition, but the consensus of the experts is that by the age of four pre-schoolers use grammar almost as well as adults (Bruner, 1993; Chomsky, 2002; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 1996; Pinker, 1995). The complexity of young children's speech practices is

apparent in the conversation between five children, which were recorded by Vivian Paley (1981) in her kindergarten classroom. Even though Paley's children are exposed to written language in the form of story books or reference works fetched from the library, textual material comes to them in the oral form: It is read aloud and explained by the teacher. The following analysis of a typical kindergarten conversation is guided by the ideas of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and his discussion of the phenomenology of speech.

Paley's (1981) kindergarten class had soaked and planted lima beans in milk cartons, but after a few weeks only two sprouted. When Wally sifted through the dirt in his planter he could not find any lima beans—and neither could the other children. They were puzzled by the mystery of the vanished lima beans and for weeks argued and theorized that robbers had stolen the beans. Here is one of their typical conversations:

Andy: My father has two cactus plants in the big windows in his office. You know why? When robbers come in at night they touch the cactus plants and have to go back where they came from. To get the prickles out. That's why my daddy has those plants.

Deana: What if you got stuck in the desert when you weren't stealing anything?

Eddie: What if he stole the whole cactus plant?

Andy: Then he might fall on it and get stuck by it.

Tanya: How about if the robber came in another way except by the way the cactus are?

Andy: He can't. The doors are locked.

Tanya: Does he have a cactus in all the windows? The robber could come through another window.

Andy: Only if he has a ladder. And how can he open the window if the lock is on the inside? And if he tries to break the window he could cut his arm.

Wally: They take him to jail if he breaks the window.

Eddie: He could break through the door.

Tanya: Then he might fall on the cactus.

Andy: I am going to tell my daddy to get more cactus plants for every window. And also one by the door.

Wally: Hey, here's a great idea. Let's put a cactus by the lima beans the next time. (p. 61)

Merleau-Ponty (1962) points out that speech is always situated in an interpersonal field and a particular location, with a speaker and a listener taking turns exchanging language: The children have their conversations in the classroom, from which the lima beans disappeared mysteriously. This provides the lived context for the conversation and the stimulus for what is talked about. The children are embodied and share the same environmental and historical context (they are in the here and now). This particular conversation refers to conversations the children had in the previous weeks, and it is part of the historical stream of speech, which spans a temporal frame that

recalls the past and sets up themes for future conversations. In oral cultures, as with these children, the context of the conversation is clear and shared and does not need to be filled in (Ong, 1982): Wally's indignation when he found the lima beans gone from the dirt in his container is remembered by all, and so are other things lost over the weeks before this conversation. In his study of illiterate people in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia, Luria (1976) documented how the exclusive immersion into conversational contexts affected the kinds of thinking and speaking his participants engaged in: They refused to give definitions or comprehensive descriptions of things because situational events are obvious, and because a description or definition would miss many essential (non-visual) experiential aspects of things. Paley's (1981) children do not have to describe or define "cactus," but have an immediate grasp of the spiny, dangerous plant and its world, and they weave it into their conversation.

Speech is profoundly interpersonal and social and makes it possible "to think according to others which enriches our own thought" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 179).² The children have an implicit understanding that turn-taking makes speech generative: The cactus theme suggested by Andy is picked up by Eddie, Tanya, and Wally, who spin it forward. On the other hand, Deana's introduction of "cactus in the desert" falls flat because it leads too far away from the present location and the urgency of solving the mystery in this room. In oral conversation there is an immediate feed-back loop between speaker and listener in the service of the conversation. It is surprising to notice how well the children listen and take up, or "think according to," the ideas suggested by their conversation partners. They excitedly contribute their ideas, which link up closely with what the other child said but also amplify and modify and add to the other speaker's expressions. When we listen to a conversation partner we are "taken over by the other's speech, it fully occupies our mind," "we are possessed by it" as if under a "spell" (p. 180). Andy's story of the cactus on his father's windowsill has power, and the children become deeply engaged in the images and speculative thoughts it suggests. Only Deana drops out of the conversation because the other children were not willing to follow the spell of her speech, and she was unable or unwilling to change tack.

There is a profound connection between thinking and speaking, but Merleau-Ponty (1962) points out that language is not a simple utensil of cognition, as the constructivists claim (Piaget, 1955): It is not thinking that clothes itself in the garb of language, but the process of linguistic exchange produces and sustains thinking. Thought urges toward expression in language, and expressive speaking moves thinking forward. We do not know what we think before we speak it. "Thus speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 178). Andy's idea of connecting the cactus to the mysterious robbers is a wonderful conver-

sational gambit. It has so much potential for speculation, and it intersects with the emotional puzzle of missing things that has occupied the children for a while. We could say that speech awakens thought and even accomplishes it by gathering and directing it and combining old thoughts into new ones in order for the language exchange between speakers to flow. The thought processes that Andy, Deana, Wally, Tanya, and Eddie produce are not individual but communal: Thought is born and accomplished in the evolving of their conversation. It flows through them, augmented (or stifled) by each individual contribution. Together they think better and more creatively than alone. The children speak to each other not in order to exchange information, but to re-live and approach the mystery of vanishing things. The excitement of their conversation lies not in its conceptual content, but in how much of the imaginary world they can open up.

At the beginning of the children's conversation, they are not sure where it will go. Andy introduces the themes of "robbers" and "protection against robbers," but it is by no means sure that the conversation will connect the themes to the missing beans. And yet it seems that the conversation tends that way. Before our own words are spoken, we reach for them. Words have a "near presence," they are "behind me," and come to realization in the act of speaking (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 180). This emergence becomes particularly clear in Wally's final statement, as he discovers what everyone was reaching for: "Let's put a cactus by the lima beans the next time." Cactuses protect against robbers in a physical and magical way. "Cactus," "robbers," and "lima beans" are intuitively connected from the beginning, but it takes the children a while to consciously see the associative chain. It is as if they are working from the emotional complex of "protection against robbers" towards the final cognitive connection between cactus and lima bean, but need the bridge of speech to get there.

The conversation about the cactus allows for an imaginary participation in thoughts that are not connected to the here and now. The cactus does not reside in the room and is not present to their senses. It exists for all but Andy—who probably saw it in his father's office—outside their field of sensory experience. It is a purely imaginary object, which Andy introduces into their thought processes. However, the conversation partners treat it as completely real, as real as the lima beans to which it is linked. Language forms an "organism of words," which establishes a linguistic world and a new dimension of experience alongside the perceptual world. The word "cactus" has a location in the linguistic world for which the children reach, and some do it more successfully than others. Every human language, spoken or read, is a symbolic form of communication, in which the secondary world of invisible symbols is experienced as compelling and as real as the world of the senses. Luria (1981) succinctly summarized the power that language gives to the human child:

The enormous advantage is that their world doubles. In the absence of words, humans would have to deal only with those things which they could perceive and manipulate directly. With the help of language, they can deal with things which they have not perceived even indirectly and with things which were part of the experience of earlier generations. Thus the word adds another dimension to the world of humans....animals have only one world, the world of objects and situations which can be perceived by the senses. Humans have a double world. (p. 35)

The coming of words in the conversation between the children is based on the activity of trying to affect the world shared with the other. Speech has an expressive substructure that is deeply emotional, rather than conceptual. Through their speech, they want to draw each other in and create a common world, where everyone contributes to the complex cactus/robber/lima bean problem. Speech is a fundamental activity whereby human beings project themselves towards a "world" that can be illuminated and shared with the other. Paley (1981) does not tell us what happens after this conversation, but I am sure that if the class plants beans again, the children will want to "put a cactus by the lima beans the next time," as Wally suggests. The linguistic/symbolic world and its gestures are intermingled with the structure of the sensory/experienced world, which they outline and concur with. If a speech act is too far removed from the experienced world and does not fit into the emotional substructure of shared concerns, the conversation ends or the speaker's interjection is ignored. Not every thought is generative. Language, ultimately, is not a tool for expressing thought, but "it is the subject's taking up a position in the world of his meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 193). The positions, even within the same conversation, can vary: Andy's role is that of an eye witness and defender of cactus-power, Deana's that of a silenced fool, and Wally's that of the synthesizing genius.

Throughout the year the children talk about the same theme of robbers when matchbox cars, coats, sweaters, and rugs disappear mysteriously. The intention to speak resides in an open experience, which leads to the productivity of speaking and is not merely repeating the memorized stack of words stored in the speaker's memory. The young child's desire for speech arises from "the ever-re-created opening in the plenitude of being" (Merleau-Paley, 1962, p. 197), and it is this plenitude that lets these kindergarteners approach the vanishing of the beans repeatedly and speak to each other over and over again. The conversations in Paley's kindergarten are productive, and we get a glimpse of the many possible themes and directions for thinking and speaking that open up when the children speak with each other: They discuss the nature of the man in the moon, if mothers collect bones and water and put them into their unborn babies, the functioning of pulleys, and how sugar comes from sugar beets. There is always more that could be said: The silence of the "more" is the fertile ground for all speaking.

Key Themes/Constituents of Oral Language Experience

Our brief phenomenology of the speech act highlights some key themes in the structure of oral language experience (we should keep in mind, however, that the following descriptions of the features of spoken language are written as positive descriptions, but that each of them also contains the possibility for failure and distortion within it).

1. The Embodied Context:

Speech is situated in an interpersonal field and a particular location, with a speaker and a listener taking turns exchanging language. There is a lived context for the conversation, which is also the stimulus for what is talked about. Conversation partners are embodied and share the same environmental and historical context (they are in the here and now.) Engaged in a conversation, we think according to others, which, in turn, enriches our own thought. Moreover, we are taken over by other's speech, it fully occupies our mind, and we are possessed by it as if under a spell.

2. Speaking and Thinking:

Thought urges toward expression in language and expressive speaking moves thinking forward. We do not know what we think before we speak it. Thus speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it. Before our own words are spoken, we reach for them. Words have a near presence; they are "behind me" and come to realization in the act of speaking. Language is not a simple utensil of cognition. It is not thinking that clothes itself in the garb of language, but the process of linguistic exchange itself produces and sustains thinking.

3. Sense and Symbol:

Language provides us with an organism of words, which establishes a linguistic world and a new dimension of experience alongside the perceptual world. Every human language, spoken or read, is a symbolic form of communication, in which the secondary world of invisible symbols is experienced as compelling and as real as the world of the senses.

4. Shared Worlds:

Speech is a fundamental activity whereby human beings project themselves towards a world that can be illuminated and shared with the other. The linguistic/symbolic world and its gestures are intermingled with the structure of the sensory/experienced world, which they outline and concur with. Language, ultimately, is not a tool for expressing thought, but it is the subject's taking up a position in the world of his or her meaning. Speech has an expressive substructure that is deeply emotional, rather than conceptual.

5. Language is Generative

The intention to speak resides in an open experience, which leads to the productivity of speaking and is not merely repeating the memorized stack of words stored

in the speaker's memory. Language arises out of the ever-re-created opening in the plenitude of being. There is always more that could be said: The silence of the "more" is the fertile ground for all speaking.

Reading and Perception

To Be Alphabetized

Language enters the child's life as a powerful and transformative event. It begins as a sensory-musical presence in the womb (DeCasper & Spence, 1986), develops alongside the toddler's symbolic play, and undergoes a radical transformation when the young child learns how to read. The musical, the symbolic, and the textual aspects of language are all manifestations and possibilities inherent in language itself. Reading is rooted in human speech, but it also deviates from oral speech practice. Learning how to read requires that children change the way they perceive and think about the world. Textuality, in particular, reduces certain aspects of the language experience and intensifies others.

In their research on oral and literate competencies of children from kindergarten through third grade, Torrance and Olson (1985) discovered that children who are better readers use more psychological verbs that reflect cognitive processes (*think, know, decide, wonder, etc.*), but do not use a greater variety of affective verbs (*like, hate, love, care, etc.*). They argue that the predominance of cognitive verbs in young readers indicates their mastery of de-contextualization: The children understand that there is a difference between what a person means and what is actually said, i.e., that words and sentences per se mean something independent of a speaker. In order to understand the word on the page, the child must be able to recognize that words are words and can be represented in different media. "This is a basic move in coming to recognize 'words' as constituents of utterances, and it is a move that may be prerequisite to 'reading' any words at all" (p. 268). On the other hand, the researchers found that good conversational skills and oral competence, such as turn-taking and holding up one's end of a conversation, does not relate to success in learning how to read. This discovery indicates that successful engagement with text requires that the child achieves a reflective distance from the speech act. Language for these readers is no longer an intuitive, unconscious extension of their bodies, but a consciously, reflectively used tool.

Speech, in the conversation between Paley's (1981) children, was woven into a full sensory field. As Andy spoke about the cactus on his father's window sill, the children were sitting or standing together in close proximity. They saw each other, heard Tanya's breath as she got ready to interject her "how about" into the conversation, and sensed each other's gestures and facial expressions. The oral speech act is performed in a synesthetic sensory environment, where seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and

touching together make sense out of the flow of conversation and its context.

Before phonetic/alphabetic writing systems were invented, many cultures used pictograms as signs for objects, but the drawback of pictographic systems is that a vast number of signs are needed to code the many words of a spoken language (Goody, 1968). Alphabetization, on the other hand, is the translation of the sound system of a language into a small set of pictographic signs, which in the current Western alphabet means 26 symbols that code 5 vowels and 21 consonants (with some standard combinations between them). The invention of the alphabet created an economical and convenient instrument for recording languages, and we often forget what a momentous achievement this was: Goody (1968) remarked that the notion of representing a sound by a graphic symbol is "a stupefying leap of the imagination" (p. 38).³

While pictographic notation in general maintains its connection with the visual world by imitating it in pictures, alphabetic notation imitates language itself, and not what it refers to. Reading alphabetic notation means to decipher the sound of language from an abstract letter pictograph and then translate it into linguistic references. Alphabetic signs encode the symbolic system of spoken words, which are already one step removed from the world of the senses. The difficulty that many children have with this system is that the visual letters on the page have no intrinsic pattern relation with the phonemes they represent. They are arbitrary and have to be learned as a system. We could even argue that discrete phonemes do not exist in the flow of language that children use, and that a system of phonemes is an artificial and unintuitive construct, which then has to be linked to the artificial system of the alphabet. Before writing can make sense, beginning readers have to submit themselves to the rules of a senseless, arbitrary system of letters and phonics. Meanwhile teachers hope that each child will somewhere undergo Goody's "stupefying leap of the imagination" in which the chicken scratches on the page suddenly come together as a referential text.⁴

Alphabetic notation, then, is the visual representation of language sounds (as determined by cultural conventions). Engaging with texts, child readers have to restructure their perception: Language that existed primarily as an intuitive, oral event must be translated into a reflective, visual happening, where the visual spectacle of letters on the page has nothing to do with the multifarious visual experience of the perceptual field surrounding the reader. A written text is a visual abstraction which represents sound and context by eliminating it. Here we have the first example of the insertion of writing technology into oral discourse and the dynamic of intensification and reduction which it brings. The very structure of alphabetization, which is the foundation of Western reading practices, intensifies the representational capacity of language while at the same time unmooring it from its sensory anchor in the perceived world.

Reading in an Oral World

In the history of literacy there is an interesting chapter which describes the transition between reading as an oral and a visual event. Long after the invention of the alphabet, the written word remained closely tied to the ear and the voice: Until the 13th century most European literate people could not read silently. When you entered a medieval scriptorium, you would not find a hushed, silent library, but a community of mumblers and munchers (Illich, 1996). The readers would softly read out the words from the page, the scribes would dictate the words to their hands as they copied the text, and all would have intense bodily experiences as the sound settled into their senses and bones; some readers, like Talmudic scholars today, would rock back and forth. It is almost unimaginable to us that most people in the 12th century, even highly learned scholars, did think it impossible to read silently without moving their lips. When Peter the Venerable had a cough, he could not read a book, neither in the choir nor in his cell to himself. True silent reading was occasionally practiced in antiquity, but it was considered a feat: Augustine was amazed that his teacher Ambrose sometimes read a book without moving his lips. For the mumbling reader, the page was a "sounding page," a "soundtrack picked up by the mouth and voiced by the reader for his own ear. For the medieval reader the page is literally embodied, incorporated" (p. 54). This medieval oral reading practice was still closely related to the embodied, synesthetic speech act that we discussed above. The written text maintained its deep sensory connection to the spoken word, and reading was a slow recapitulation of an earlier speech act. Compare this carnal, oral, "deep view" of the written page to our contemporary understanding of texts as primarily *visual* events: "The modern reader conceives of the page as a plate that inks the mind, and of the mind as a screen onto which the page is projected and from which, at a flip, it can fade" (p. 54).

The text as a purely visual event is a historical invention with far reaching consequences, and it appeared in the late Middle Ages when silent reading and a new technology of text-production took over. The late 12th century invented (for the Western world) page lay-out, chapter division, the consistent numbering of chapter and verse, indices, tables of content, introductions, library inventories and concordances. Illich (1996) points out that this change in the technology of textuality fostered a change in the way reality is conceived. It created a new kind of reader who could read silently and swiftly, "one who wants to acquire in a few years of study a new kind of acquaintance with a larger number of authors than a meditating monk could have perused in a lifetime" (p. 96). The new kind of readers and writers looked at the page and experienced the exteriorization of a *cogitatio*, a thought structure, a thought outline of reasons. It became the foundation for the study practices of European universities and the production of bodies of knowledge in academic disciplines.⁵

The new relationship between text and mind, the ability to conceive of the written word as an abstract and inaudible record of thought, was the psychological foundation for the print culture, which began with Gutenberg in the 15th century. The elimination of sound intensified and sped up the reading process and involved the mind in a different way. The field of sound, as Ong (1982) pointed out, is not spread out before human beings but is diffuse and all around them. The visual field, however, is focused and laid out before the eyes. In the oral world human consciousness experiences itself surrounded by sound and enveloped by a cosmos. In the visual/textual world the cosmos is spread out before the eye: "Only after print and the extensive experience with maps that print implemented would human beings, when they thought about the cosmos or the universe or "world", think primarily of something laid out before their eyes, as in a modern printed atlas, a vast surface or assemblage of surfaces (vision presents surfaces) ready to be explored" (p. 73).

Pre-school age children experience their books in a way that is much closer to the oral, meditative reading of the mumbling monks. Our son, from the time he was 18 months old, insisted that we read the same book every night. For years we read Alley's *Busy People All Over Town* (1988), a picture book with extensive descriptive text. (Even though the book has been out of print for 20 years, there are still three current reviews on the Amazon website: Parents report that their young children want to "read" the book "over and over," "a hundred times"). Sitting together on Nick's bed, my husband or I read the text to him and we talked about the pictures. We were not allowed to abbreviate or change the wording because even as a toddler Nick knew the text by heart. The repetitive reading of the book was not an act of gathering information or new experiences, but it served to re- evoke a familiar world, which soothed him before sleep. Ong (1988) points out that in the oral world the word is essentially a call or a cry to the other, and that speech is not a reification of concepts or information, "but an event, an action" between people (p. 267). Every night we—and the other parents and children who have loved this book—enacted and performed the same story-event because it made our child feel safe, comfortable, and protected.

Synesthesia

Reading restructures the perceptual experience of human beings. We saw that the alphabet requires the translation of the language field into phonemes, which then are represented by symbols on the page. As a perceptual event alphabetization reduces the surrounding soundscape to the words that the reader can recreate in the mind, and the field of vision to the linear progression of letters on the page. While the medieval reader maintained the close connection between letter and sound, silent reading practice suppresses auditory perception and language becomes less and less a matter for the voice and ear. Visual perception,

as well, is altered: The reader must see through the letters on the page in order to conjure up the invisible presence that the text encodes.

In his phenomenological analysis of alphabetization as a perceptual phenomenon, Abram (1996) shows how perception changes in the transition from oral to textual engagement with the world in non-literate, animistic cultures. His analysis, however, also applies to the restructuring child consciousness undergoes in the transition from orality to literacy. Prior to the immersion into textuality, the creative, synesthetic interplay of the senses with the perceived world creates a sense of magical envelopment. The earth is experienced as alive and meaningful and full of messages to the perceiver: "Direct, prereflective perception is inherently synesthetic, participatory, and animistic, disclosing the things as elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies" (p.130). Abram's description of direct perception parallels Piaget's findings that young children's thinking is participatory, magical, and animistic (Piaget, 1929/1951).

Synesthesia works by bringing all the senses into play in the act of perception. We see something and know what sound it will make when we knock on it, how its texture should feel to the touching fingers, or how heavy it is when we pick it up. Even very young infants have this ability of cross-modal, synesthetic perception (Meltzoff & Borton, 1979; Stern, 1985). When one sensory mode is evoked the others come into play as well.

In learning how to read we must break the spontaneous participation of our eyes and our ears in the surrounding terrain (where they had ceaselessly converged in the synesthetic encounter with animals, plants, and streams) in order to recouple those senses upon the flat surface of the page. As a Zuni elder focuses her eyes upon a cactus and hears the cactus begin to speak, so we focus our eyes on these printed marks and immediately hear voices. We hear spoken words, witness strange scenes or visions, even experience other lives. (Abram, 1996, p. 131)

Abram's analysis of the relationship between alphabetization and perception makes clear that the magical synesthesia, the evocation of all the senses, is relocated from the world to the text. When the eye perceives something, the other senses participate, even if they do not perceive directly. This is the virtual, imaginary dimension of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). As the eyes read through the signs on the page, the mind brings all the senses into play to create a whole virtual world complete with sensory resonances. The magical power of books has its roots in the phenomenon of synesthesia: As we read, the world of the book is as compelling and sometimes more real to us than the actual world of the senses. "As nonhuman animals, plants, and even 'inanimate' rivers once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so the 'inert' letters on the page now speak to us! This is a form of animism that we take for granted, but it is animism none the less—as mysterious as a talking stone" (Abram, 1996, p. 131). And Abram is correct: We

are animists when it comes to textual signification. We give ourselves over to the mysterious voices and beings that arise through the letters on the page and take them seriously—and among literate people we take the world of texts more seriously than the world of the senses: Most children spend more time in the text-centered symbolic discourse of school than in exploring and talking about the world they directly perceive.

The introduction of literacy changes children's relationship to the world because it shifts their attention from the animated, meaningful context of their perceived worlds toward the purely symbolic and *unperceived* dimension of the text's virtual world. Abram argues that the magic of full, synesthetic perception, the spell that it casts upon us and the force with which it draws us into a connection with the world, has changed its direction when we enter a literate world. Literacy is a technology that distances us from the life world and dulls our ability to attend to and "read" fully the expressions of the world of minerals, plants, animals, and the elements: "It is only when a culture shifts its participation to these printed letters that the stones fall silent" (p. 131). Here we have a second instance of the structural intensification and reduction which chirographic technology brings: The synesthetic intensification of the virtual/symbolic dimension of language and the reduction of the body's engagement with a plentiful, signifying, sensory environment.

Reading and the Symbolic Order

The Loss of Context

In order to perform the act of reading and to make the strange restructuring of auditory and visual perception possible, the young reader's experiential field of speech must be reconfigured. As long as children pay attention to the fullness of the perceptual field around them, the magical transportation into the world of the text cannot happen. In order to be a reader, a child has to let go of the lived context of the situation they find themselves in. Vygotsky (1986) noted that the young child's entry into literacy introduces an abstract process that is removed from the child's actual situation. Attention must focus through the visual process of decoding to the world of meaning the text transmits. This world of the text has no relationship to the child's here and now. The lived context for the conversation between speakers has to be eliminated: The room must be forgotten, other children must be blocked out, and the only one speaking is the text. Other bodies, and even the child's own body, are intrusions and must be restrained to a chair behind a table so that they don't occupy the space in social and disruptive ways. This is a change in the situatedness of language (Theme 1: *The embodied context* from our analysis of the speech act above). Andy, Deana, Eddie, Tanya, and Wally must stop talking to each other. Postman (1994) puts it succinctly:

But with the printed book another tradition began: the isolated reader and his private eye. Orality became muted, and the reader and his response became separated from a social context. The reader retired within his own mind, and from the sixteenth century to the present what most readers have required of others is their absence, or, if not that, their silence. In reading, both the writer and reader enter into a conspiracy of sorts against social presence and consciousness. Reading is, in a phrase, an asocial act. (p. 27)

When we are teaching children how to read, we should be aware that reading requires a profound change in the child's language experience. Speech is a very social and embodied activity, which has its own momentum and rewards. Most children love to talk to each other, and as we saw with Paley's (1981) class, they draw each other forward into the world of ideas that they talk about. Reading as an "asocial act" requires the child to engage with a speaker, the author, who is disembodied and unresponsive and does not create openings for the child's own introjections into the web of language and thought. The conversation, from the child's perspective, is passive and receptive, and the reader has no power to shape and alter the course of the conversation other than to disagree or put the book down. The child moves from the dialogue of oral exchange to the monologue of the text (Vygotsky, 1986). This is especially difficult for beginning readers, who cannot yet reconstitute the symbolic world behind the letters on the page, and have not yet tasted the pleasure that a good text evokes. Even though reading also requires an active mind, its activity is virtual, solitary, and disembodied. The very power of texts comes from their reduction of the actual, social, and embodied dimensions of language experience. The loss of the immediate social context opens the reader to the new context that the text offers. From a lived sociality the child moves into a virtual sociality that promises encounters with fictional characters. These encounters are powerful, disembodied, and invisible to others, which intensifies the reader's sense of privacy and interiority.

The Phenomenology of Entering a Text

Most children love stories. As an adult I remember being spellbound by one of David Abram's lectures about the gestural connection between humans and animals. He mesmerized us with words and movement, and as I glanced around the auditorium I saw my colleagues unconsciously bob their heads in imitation of a sea lion, which they clearly saw in their imaginations. The virtual reality created by language is extremely powerful. Oral story telling is supported by the physical presence and the shared context of narrator and listener. This is also the case when an adult reads aloud to children. In reading to oneself, however, this context is missing. The full magic of the written text can only come alive when the child overcomes the resistance of body and senses and enters into the particular symbolic structure that the web of sentences creates.

In his phenomenological analysis of the literary work of art, Ingarden (1973) suggests that out of the component parts of textuality (phonemes, words, sentences, and the textual unfolding as a whole) a particular *world* arises, and it is this world (which transcends the author's intended meaning) which the reader finds compelling—or not. The child has to be able to "climb aboard" and "accept the given perspectives" (Iser, 1972, p. 282), while at the same time be willing to collaborate with the text to allow it to come to fruition in the imagination:

The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it represents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. The virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination. (p. 284)

The world displayed by the text refers to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) idea of the organism of words, which creates a new dimension of experience alongside the perceptual world (Theme 3: *Sense and symbol*). The child's imagination fills the gaps in the text, supplies what is not there. The text, on the other hand, allows the child to live and experience worlds that could never come to his or her immediate, embodied senses. A book takes on its full existence only in its readers (Poulet, 1969). If it receives their full participation, it allows them to absorb new experiences:

As soon as I replace my direct perception by the words of a book, I deliver myself, bound hand and foot, to the omnipotence of fiction. I say farewell to what is, in order to feign belief in what is not. I surround myself with fictitious beings; I become the prey of language. There is no escaping this take-over. Language surrounds me with its unreality. (p. 55)

The reader's thoughts and feelings are occupied by the thoughts of the author, and these in their turn draw new boundaries in our personality. The consciousness of the reader "behaves as though it were the consciousness of another" and "on loan to another" who feels, suffers, and thinks in it (pp. 56–57). Here we have another intensification and reduction of speech: The possibility of thinking according to others (Theme 2: *Speaking and thinking*) is intensified in the monological exposure to the text's voice. While in the oral speech act, the child participates momentarily in the speech of the other and then takes his or her turn; however, the written speech act requires the sustained immersion in the fictional world created by an author. The writer extends his or her own being by displaying a world with the hope that readers will share it (Theme 4: *Shared worlds*). The silence of the reader and the temporal structure of the continuous, uninterrupted voice of the author preclude the reader from interjecting and changing the direction of the language exchange. The world of the book worms its way into the consciousness of the reader. All a reader can do is close the book and refuse participation in the symbolic world the text promises.

The Symbolic Order

The conversations in Paley's (1981) class revealed how language gave the children a linguistic/symbolic world, which contained things (like the cactus) that were not actually present. This second order symbolic reality which is created in ordinary conversations is intensified and amplified in texts. The term "symbolic order" refers to the organism of words and the new dimension of virtual experience beyond the senses that appear in human language exchanges (Theme 3: *Sense and symbol*). It influences young infants before they themselves engage in symbolic activities (Lacan, 2002) because their parents participate in and are shaped by the languages and values of their cultures. Reading, once the child has mastered the decoding system, allows the child "to think according to others" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 179) to have experiences not available in the immediate sensory environment, and to be immersed in the cultural symbolic order more intensely.

In oral conversations, children take up each other's thoughts and weave a shared web of mind processes. In textuality, however, others' thought processes, memories, and images are recapitulated and accomplished in the child's mind without the child's direct, embodied response. Silencing the back and forth of embodied conversations intensifies the reader's exposure to the author's thoughts, images, and feelings. The most significant change that literacy introduces is the amplification of the symbolic order in the minds of children. As soon as children cross over the threshold of alphabetic decoding, they enter a compelling wonderland of ideas and experiences *which are not their own*, but which powerfully shape the mind. Literate cultures know that they need this world and that they have to colonize it. Through this process, on a massive scale, literate cultures reproduce themselves over the generations by establishing canons of texts that have to be read and internalized by children. Cultural memory is transmitted by texts. We call this process "education."

We can get a better view of the significance of the symbolic order when we look at it from a cultural-historical perspective. Literate cultures have commerce in the realities that are created by texts: Books hold knowledge and cultural memory. Books (and electronic media today) are a storehouse for memories of all sorts—records of legal transactions, historical events, philosophical arguments, poetry, scientific inventions and ideas, religious texts and commentaries, maps and calendars. Book content is the cultural currency that is transferred in the conversations of literate people and determines the intellectual and moral climate. Mumford (1934) argues that the invention of the printing press and the ensuing spread of writing technology led to a radical transformation of Western culture. "More than any other device, the printed book released people from the domination of the immediate and the local.... Print made a greater impression than the actual events.... To exist was to exist in print: The rest of

the world tended gradually to become more shadowy. Learning became book learning" (p. 28).

The proliferation of the symbolic order is fueled by the desire of writers to share their language and virtual worlds with others (Theme 4: *Shared worlds*). Print technology multiplies the audience for texts, as well as the number of authors who want to occupy the reader's mind. In turn, the dissemination of ideas in print, as Mumford indicates, inserts itself into everyday life practices and changes them radically (Theme 5: *Language is generative*). The invention of the automobile, the telephone, and electronic media was possible because their inventors could acquire the sedimented knowledge of previous generations through reading. In turn, these inventions changed where and how people lived, how they attended to and perceived their environment, and what they talked about with their neighbors.

Books do not merely contain information, but structure the way we think about reality. Literacy makes it possible to erect a conceptual scaffold above our everyday experience, which then is disseminated and transmitted through the authority of media and education. This makes the virtual reality of texts believable and compelling, even if it contradicts our senses: To exist is to exist in print. The immediate and local experience has been sacrificed to the symbolic dimension of texts.

Historically, the invention of print and the symbolic world it produced led to the cultural appearance of childhood. Those who could read and were educated were altered by literacy. The invention of "the Literate Human" inaugurated a symbolic distinction between childhood and adulthood:

From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological achievement. From print onward, the young would have to become adults, and they would have to do it by learning to read, by entering the world of typography. And in order to accomplish that they would require education. (Postman, 1994, p. 36)

Unlike biological adulthood, which comes with puberty, symbolic adulthood requires education and has to be culturally reproduced in children. We ask each child to make a series of sacrifices on the way to literacy: Bodies do not lie on the floor or skip through the streets, but must sit in rows; the speech of friends is forbidden and re-defined as idle chatter; the magic of the sense-world is drained until it becomes dulled and distant, like the flat piece of sky beyond the sealed classroom window.

Notes

1. In *Of Grammatology* (1974), Derrida argues that the alphabet should not be thought of in terms of visual notation of phonemes, but as a differentiated system of visual signs that relates to the differentiated system of phonetic signs without complete congruence between the two. This complicates Illich's (1996) and the philologist's argument since it makes the historical leap into alphabetization (and I would include here also ideographic systems of signs) even more surprising

- as a feat of the human mind: The acquisition of the alphabet requires the translation of one arbitrary system into another. But essentially Derrida's argument does not challenge the observation that pervasive writing technology brings radical changes to a culture (see also note #3).
2. The debate over the nature of language has been one of the most important discussions in 20th century philosophy. Since the Greeks, the study of language had been divided into grammar, logic, and rhetoric, with logic taking the pride of place in the philosophy of language. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, the late Wittgenstein, and Derrida shifted the emphasis—which was still apparent in Husserl's work—away from language as a conceptual tool of the logical mind towards language as performance within a personal and cultural context. Here language is no longer the expression of a private subject, but a means by which thinking is possible (Garver, 1973). Heidegger (1971) speaks of language as “the house of being” (p. 132). Merleau-Ponty (1962) thinks of it as the grillwork through which we can catch our thinking, and Derrida (1974) states that “we can think only in signs” (p. 50).
 3. Since Derrida's (1974) *Of Grammatology*, many post-structuralist thinkers have given primacy to writing over speech. However, Derrida's notion of writing does not refer to the distinction between the spoken word and symbolic notation, but refers to the complex and infinite web of signification that comes with every language act. Textuality for Derrida means that every language act exists within a context and requires interpretation (Caputo, 1997), and that language as text is a “heterogeneous, differential, and open field of forces” (Deutscher, 2005, p. 33). Language is never the tool of an interiorized subject, but is given to us by our culture and is a repetition of what came before. As such it pre-determines what is expressible on the one hand, and what cannot be said on the other. Its conventional forms structure human cognition, identity, and experience.

From the perspective of child psychology, however, language does not pre-exist in the minds of children: It does not burst forth fully fledged like Athena from the head of Zeus. *Developmentally*, voice and gesture come before speech, and speech comes before writing. Before infants are able to engage in the symbolic dimension of the language field that surrounds them, they are attuned to the music and mood of what is spoken. Speech is an embodied, co-existential phenomenon, and infants acquire speech only if they are given the opportunity to interact with other people of their culture. There is a developmental sequence to language acquisition, a sequence which goes hand in hand with the development of interpersonal relationships, perception, and cognition. Infants, for example, have to be about nine months old before they grasp that a pointing finger (signifier) refers to something beyond itself (signified), and they have to have relationships with others that allow them to want to engage in joint attention. Developmental changes also mean that language exists for the child in different ways than it does for adults.

This does not negate Derrida's (1974) notion of textuality, but it adds the bodily dimension to the human experience of language. Even though the language a child “bathes in” is culturally constructed and instituted, the child's understanding and use grows on a daily basis through bodily engagement with the world. Language—and particularly grammar—as contemporary linguists have recognized, is not taught by adults, *but acquired by children*. We cannot prevent children from picking it up as long as they live in a speaking environment. This attests either to a biological/genetic foundation for language acquisition, as Chomsky (1959, 1969) claims, or to the child's insertion into a complex existential ensemble of bodily, co-existential, spatial, and temporal structures,

complemented by the child's inborn capacities for attention and learning that allow him or her to construct their native language (Tomasello, 2003).

4. Spoken language encompasses other forms of symbolic expression, which do not use the human voice. American Sign Language (ASL), for example, is a form of speech and a full language that is not dependent on the modulations of the voice. As with hearing infants, deaf infants who grow up in signing households acquire the language of their parents almost effortlessly within the first three years of life (Meier, 1993) (while children who learn ASL past puberty rarely achieve fluency). Writing, for deaf and hearing children, is an often-difficult modification of their speech acts. In writing the primary speech/language system of a child, such as ASL, is translated into the alphabetic system. Deaf children, for example, have an easier time deciphering alphabetic visual notation if they also learn how to fingerspell (Alvarado, Puente, & Herrera, 2008), which is comparable to hearing children being taught the relationship between phoneme and grapheme. For both groups of children the in-between step of translating speech into phoneme, and symbolic gesture into fingerspelling attests to the difficulty in transitioning from embodied, contextual, and unreflected language use to the conscious acquisition of alphabetic notation and writing.
5. I have argued elsewhere (Simms, 2008) that the late middle ages saw not only shifts in literacy, but also in the ways people thought about themselves and how they conceived of childhood. The (re-)invention of silent reading, the instituting of confession in the Catholic Church, prolonged adult pilgrimages, and the children's crusade happened within a few decades of each other. The literate adult, the interiorized self, and the concept of childhood were invented at this time, and they comprise a web of profoundly entwined historical and psychological phenomena.

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