

# 1 Awakening

## *Reading and Consciousness*

*I imagined that God had created light so that people could read, and through reading, see other worlds.* (French mathematician Evariste Galois (1811–1832), as portrayed by, T. Petsinis, 1997, p. 40)

To a skilled reader a text is a window to the world. The act of reading brings into consciousness a world otherwise unknown. For such readers this is so much a matter of course that it is difficult if not impossible to imagine a life and a mind unacquainted with writing, to imagine a world, as it is fashionable to say, *avant la lettre*. Though we may have lost track of our own awakening to literacy, we may have observed children as they learn to read and have witnessed, as a sort of miracle, the birth of this new consciousness.

### AWAKENING TO THE WRITTEN WORLD

Consider the example provided by Marilynne Robinson in her recent book, *Lila* (2014), the story of a nameless outcast child who, some years later, was to become the wife of the aging Calvinist minister John Ames, whom readers met earlier in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead* (2004). “There was a long time when Lila didn’t know that words had letters and that there were other names for seasons than planting and haying” (2014, p. 10). Lila, unlike her friends, does learn to read and with it to distinguish the words from the things they represent. When she reads aloud a sign that says “General Store,” her friends, lacking such distinctions, mock her ability: “Well, anybody can see that’s a general store, so what them words going to say? County jail? It don’t look like nothing else but a store, does it?” (p. 42). One theme of the novel is the interplay between what Lila

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knew through pain and deprivation and the world as represented in language. When Ames tells her that religion has to do with existence, Lila thinks: “All right. She knew a little bit about existence. That was pretty well the only thing she knew about and she had learned the word for it from him. It was like the United States of America – they had to call it something” (p. 74). A word is a gift that somehow opens up a world.

Best known, of course, is the account by Helen Keller of the awakening provoked by the simple recognition that signs, in this case signed spellings, could represent things – that here was a web of words that could be laid over and in a sense disclose a shared world to the mind, a discovery she experienced as no less than miraculous.

Many writers have tried to capture the way that becoming a reader opened up a world previously not suspected to exist. William Cobbett, who in the 18th century grew into adulthood before learning how to read, later becoming a noted statesman, described this awakening. He said that buying and reading Jonathan Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* “procured what I have always considered a sort of birth of intellect” (Carlyle, 1947, p. 17);<sup>1</sup> he became aware of the fact that in reading he entertained not only the author’s thoughts but, more importantly, his own thoughts. It is as if encountering another’s thoughts in a written form invites a new consciousness of one’s own. At other times it is as if the writer is speaking one’s own thoughts.

So too the novelist John Williams in *Stoner* (1965) recounts the life of a Missouri farm boy whose mind is gradually awakened if not brought into existence through the study of English literature. Even in the second year of university, although he read and reread his literature assignments, “the words he read were words on pages, and he could not see the use of what he did.” That all changed when he

<sup>1</sup> Michael Clanchy pointed this out to me.

began to feel that the literature spoke to him and took him out of the present:

The past gathered out of the darkness where it stayed, and the dead raised themselves to live before him; and the past and the dead flowed into the present among the alive, so that he had for an intense instant a vision of denseness into which he was compacted and from which he could not escape, and had no wish to escape. Tristan, Iseult the fair, walked before him; Paolo and Francesca whirled in the glowing dark; Helen and bright Paris, their faces bitter with consequence, rose from the gloom. And he was with them in a way that he could never be with his fellows who ... walked unheeding in a Midwestern air. Indeed, years later when he looked back to the time before his awakening, "he was astonished by the memory of that strange figure [himself], brown and passive as the earth from which it had emerged." (1965, pp. 11–16)

The world into which one enters when becoming a reader is not always a commonly shared one. Carlo Ginzburg (1980) recounts the life and death of the 16th-century Italian miller Menocchio, newly literate presumably via the recently established school for poor children in the area, who found himself able to read the Bible. His eyes were opened. On the basis of his somewhat idiosyncratic reading he began to doubt the teachings of the Church just at the time that the Inquisition reached its peak. Among other heresies Menocchio claimed that God had not created the world: "in my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels" (pp. 5–6). When he refused to recant, he was burned at the stake. Reading, while providing a route to a unknown but existing other world, also invites the reader to imagine another of his or her own making to rival that offered by a writer.

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An equivalent “consciousness-raising” has been reported for reading and learning to read prose texts. Stewart’s (1922) early study of the effects of teaching adult illiterates to read is extended by the recent findings by Allen (2013) that by careful reading and discussing the words of the US Declaration of Independence her adult learners “found themselves suddenly as political beings, with a consciousness that had previously eluded them. They gained a vocabulary and rhetorical techniques for arguing about it” (p. 35).

Becoming a reader opens up, as well, the world of literature. Many North American children have encountered Emily Dickinson’s song-like poem:

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away,  
Nor any coursers like a page  
Of prancing poetry.  
This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toll;  
How frugal is the chariot  
That bears a human soul!

More literary readers may prefer John Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”:

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

It is somewhat of an irony that the world opened to Keats in reading Chapman's translation of the Homeric epics was a world created through oral not written composition. It has been argued (Powell, 1991) that the Greek alphabet took the form that it did in the attempt to capture the subtleties of the sound of Homer's oral poetry. So even while celebrating the importance of literacy it is imperative to remember that very complex thinking may be carried out in the absence of writing. What writing adds may remain unrecognized because those additions are manifest only in the options they make available in the spoken language.

#### AWAKENING TO LANGUAGE

Each of these cases of intellectual awakening is distinctive in that they demonstrate not only a new awareness of some property of the world but of a consciousness of the language used to express that content. This awareness of the language, the ability to think about language, lies at the base of the famous "critiques" set out by Kant, of aesthetics, morality and knowledge. All critique is thinking about thinking and so all involve a specialized language to do that thinking in. It is the nature, origin and development of that critical meta-language that we may attempt to trace to the history of writing and literacy.

Much has been written on the ways that literature stocks the world of the imagination (Oatley, 2013). But writing not only opens one to the world of literature it also is a gateway to the world of the mind. It does this, I shall argue, through a new consciousness of language. For it is this consciousness that gives rise to the forms of systematic knowledge and the ways of critical thinking that shape and have come to dominate the modern intellectual world. Thus while the account of reading and consciousness that I set out may not

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compare with “the wild surmise” experienced in opening Chapman’s *Homer*, I hope to show something equally important, namely, that there is a world of mind, hidden in the recesses of the unconscious that is brought into awareness in reading and writing and that can be examined and perhaps explained within a scientifically testable theory of the mind. At the same time it should indicate the responsibilities of education for developing this knowledge.

To understand writing and its relation to consciousness we shall need to avail ourselves of recent accounts of how learning a language makes possible a consciousness of the world and then how learning to read and write produces a new consciousness of language. This consciousness of language in turn can help to explain more reflective forms of thinking that have come to define rationality. The concepts that writing and literacy add to consciousness necessarily find a place back in oral spoken language in such a way that the natural language remains a primary medium of thought.

### UNCONVINCED

Although educators and the general public place great value on literacy, their enthusiasm rests on a shaky intellectual foundation. The founder of modern linguistics, Saussure (1916/1983, pp. 23–24), insisted that writing was not language in that “the spoken form alone constitutes the object” and he viewed the attention to the written as “the tyranny” of the alphabet. Levi-Strauss spoke for many when he wrote:

Writing is a strange thing. It would seem as if its appearance could not have failed to wreak profound changes in the living conditions of our race, and that these transformations must have been above all intellectual in character. Yet nothing of what we know of writing, or of its role in evolution, can be said to justify this conception. (Levi-Strauss, 1961, p. 291)

Levi-Strauss's dismissive attitude is shared by some contemporary writers. Although researchers influenced by Vygotsky were among the first to recognize writing as an intellectual tool, more recent work in that tradition has tended to subordinate writing to oral discourse and to the social practices of the society into which writing is introduced. Important early work, such as that of Scribner and Cole (1981), looked for the cognitive implications of writing and reading by examining learning to write in an essentially non-literate culture and concluded that what little effect it had (it did produce a consciousness of syllables, the writing system studied being a syllabary) was completely overshadowed by the social practice, letter writing, it served. However, the deeper implications of writing may be revealed only when writing reaches its fullest flower, when examined from what Standish called "the vantage point of the present" (Standish, 2013, p. vii). Only when pushed to its limits in philology and science, dictionary making and logic, and when perpetuated in a culture of literacy, does the nature and significance of writing become clear. The inventors of writing had no idea that writing could represent speech; some modern writers seem reluctant to admit that it could serve as an instrument for deductive reasoning. Yet those were among the features of writing that modern societies continue to elaborate, exploit and advance through a literate education. At the same time it is important to remember that there are many kinds of writing, employed in many different cultures for many different uses and with diverse effects.

Critics point out that anything that may be said in writing may be expressed in oral speech, that unwritten law precedes written law, that dialogue is more productive than monologue, that social argument is more important to thinking than prose writing, that computer skills are more important than reading (Spiro et al., 2015). Socio-cultural and educational theorists such as Wells (1999) argue that attention to written texts distracts from the importance of practical hands-on experience and oral discourse. Some see writing

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as little more than a record of what is worked out in talk. To address such concerns it is necessary to return to the more basic questions of the relation between speech and writing, between writing and consciousness and between writing and rationality.

Modern readers immersed in a reading culture and equipped with a literate consciousness may find it difficult to recover an “innocent eye,” an eye untainted by the experience of reading and writing. Reconstructing a world without words, letters, sentences and documents cannot be reached by introspection alone but is a task for research and theory.

### READING, CONSCIOUSNESS AND RATIONALITY

To proceed with the task of tracing the links between reading, consciousness and rationality it may be useful to outline how these concepts are to be used.

*Reading.* Reading and writing are used not only to refer to the decoding and encoding of signs, but as general terms that include the ability to read and write both simple texts and complex ones characteristic of the literary, governmental, scientific and educational institutions of a modern bureaucratic society; in a word, the model of literacy that defines the language arts from primary school through the university – from word identification to essayist prose. Thus, reading and literacy are to be seen as somewhat analogous to knowing a natural language. Once one is a speaker of a language, one can converse on virtually any topic with anyone who is also a speaker of that language. So too with writing as a representation of a natural language; to be literate is to be able to participate in a broad range of literate discourses, discourses based on writing.

*Consciousness.* Consciousness is both a condition for knowledge and a consequence of knowledge. Gerald Edelman (2004, p. xi) pointed out that “consciousness is the guarantor of all we hold human and precious. Its permanent loss is considered equivalent to death, even if the body persists in its vital signs.” But “consciousness” is ambiguous in that it sometimes refers to a kind of awareness or

vigilance common to all animals and essential to all learning, and at others to something specific, to be conscious of something as something. Robert Brandom (1994) expressed this distinction in terms of *sentience*, the consciousness we share with primates and other animals, and *sapience*, the consciousness, uniquely human, that one has of a thing in thinking or saying something about it, that is, casting something into linguistic form. Most verbalizable thoughts are about objects and events in the world that one can refer to and comment on. But others, more important to my argument, are thoughts *about* the language itself. As we shall see, that is where reading and rationality come into the picture.

Consciousness of language plays a critical role in an account of language and literacy. Children seem not to know that their speech is composed of elements of sound called phonemes. Such linguistic processes are unconscious, or, as I shall say, transparent. Even most adults do not realize that “is” is the third-person, present, singular form of the verb “to be” and yet they routinely manage subject–verb agreement. Learning to read makes some of this opaque or unconscious knowledge conscious and explicit. Neither the nature of this implicit knowledge nor the means by which it is made explicit is well understood. To some, phonemes are as real as cats and need only to be brought to consciousness in learning to read an alphabetic script. To others phonemes are as ephemeral as fairies, the only reality the visual marks and the meanings assigned to them. Our task ahead is to characterize implicit knowledge of language and to provide a model or mechanism by means of which such implicit knowledge is made explicit as an object of thought.

*Rationality.* It is widely agreed that all humans display a form of rationality defined by the ability to give reasons for what they say and do. This form of rationality, perhaps better thought of as reasonableness, is intrinsic to the acquisition of a first language. Sapient consciousness, consciousness of the world enabled by language, allows one to construct what Wilfred Sellars (1997) called “the space of reasons” and hence to give reasons for one’s utterances and actions.

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But in addition to reasons for justifying actions and beliefs, there are, I suggest, reasons about reasons, metareasons that may be used to evaluate reasons in terms of relevance, evidence, validity, clarity, ambiguity and the like. This is the language of formal rationality that, I shall further argue, derives to some degree from writing and a written tradition. Reasonable and rational are usually seen as synonyms and for most purposes they are. But to understand how reading and literacy contribute to a distinctive way of thinking, it is necessary to distinguish those actions that are reasonable, that is, those justifiable by reasons, from those that involve the scrutiny of reasons that we may more narrowly describe as, strictly speaking, rational.

### READING AND LEARNING TO READ

Long before reading and literacy became a topic for science and philosophy it was a topic for those concerned with the practical arts of teaching children to read and write. These teaching practices have remained much the same since classical times (aside from the size of the class and the strictness of the masters). Grendler (1989, p. 409) provided a vivid description of 18th-century schools: "Teachers and textbooks taught by breaking a skill into the smallest components, drilling them intensively, and then assembling the bits to make the whole." Although this sounds eerily familiar, there was a period in the 1920s when the teaching of reading took a decisive turn against drill and practice methods (Ontario Teachers Manual, 1920). Concerned that some children merely called out the letters and words without thinking about their meanings, reformers developed the "word method" in which children learned to recognize words with "clear, vivid meanings," primarily words that had become familiar through memorized nursery rhymes and words that carried emotional weight. Larger units of meaning such as songs and stories received equal attention. Later on, the Dr. Seuss books essentially implemented these practices. Only when a rich body of words was known by "sight" did instruction begin, if it began at all, on breaking