

INTRODUCTIONS

by Eric Willis

As I reflect on the Living Literacies experience and the papers from that conference reproduced in this book, I am reminded of a trip to Crete where among other things I had the opportunity to see the Phaistos Disc in Herakleion's Archaeological Museum. This small clay disc from the Minoan civilization is probably 3500 years old and inscribed on both sides with forty-five different pictures in a distinct and fascinating spiral pattern. To this day it is the only one of its kind ever discovered among all the archaeological relics of the Mediterranean and still fascinates scholars, who haven't yet been able to decipher and agree on its meaning. One is left to only imagine what the author of the disc was attempting to communicate and when or if we will ever be able to understand its message.

The tragedy of this lost literacy is a reminder of the timeliness of the Living Literacies project and conference held at York University, Toronto from November 14 to 15, 2002. Intended from the beginning to explore the how, what, and why of literacy, the conference was a huge success at stimulating discussion and debate about the potential meanings of literacy in Canada's advanced technological society of the twenty-first century. What follows here are the presentations from that conference. As captivated and excited as I was by the idea and intent of this conference during the planning stages, I am even more impressed by the range and quality of the presentations included in this book.

As the Master of Stong College here at York, I take pride in telling you that this conference and book are products of a committee of Fellows of the college that include Rob Bishop, Lara Ubaldi, B. W. Powe, and myself. As the prime mover for both, however, a special thanks goes out to B. W. Powe for the genesis and genius of the idea, the conviction to stay the course through the inevitable bumps and bruises that accompany an undertaking of this magnitude, and for the foresight to promote the significance of this issue.

As intriguing and mysterious as the Phaistos Disc might well be to scholars, its story also informs us of the importance of seeking to understand and illuminate literacy in its many forms. It is our hope that this publication will help in this process for the reader.

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



Light Between Words

by B.W.Powe

Taken from:

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

Living Literacies Text of the
November 14-16, 2002 Conference

PART ONE: ORIGINS AND FUTURITY

Light Between Words

by **B. W. Powe**

Living Literacies began with words, in words – with an idea – in a conversation. Three years ago, John O’Leary and I were talking over lunch. We’d had many conversations before – indeed, it has become almost a ritual for us to do so. But this conversation went in a new direction. We talked about the literacy movement; then suddenly, as if from nowhere, we found ourselves talking about the philosophy of literacy. What we meant by this was: how does literacy move us; what does it mean to have grown up within an alphabetic culture; to what degree has our civilization in the west been shaped by the idea, or ideal, of literacy itself? We thought out loud, to one another: to read and write, speak and interpret, could be part of our legacy of human rights, part of the “civil” in civilization. Then, of course, we recognized that there are many forms of literacy – oral, visual, mathematical, print, cyber. We acknowledged the vigorous, often acrimonious debate that can erupt between furious proponents of the Book and relentless advocates of the E-screen, “being digital.”

John and I were confronted by a plethora of ideas. It was more than an abundance; it was more like a torrent. We felt as if we had tapped some source, a surge through which that one word: “literacy” flowed. Hence we said, and agreed, let’s step into the open; let’s create an event that would let loose those ideas in the public sphere. Let’s see what we could do to summon many powerful minds on this subject. Let’s see what we could do to make the words spring forward, to make our minds flow over that idea, what literacy means.

Thus this conference. I don’t remember who came up with the name, Living Literacies. But from the start we liked its ambiguity: to live through literacy, to recognize still vital legacies, to acknowledge multiform traditions, to attend to the echoing letters in our lives, to be alive in our traditions and our dreams and intimations, our printed and spoken words, our images and our screens, the human energy radiant in our creations. The Latin *littera* means character – a message. The title implied: We are bearing messages.

But our intentions were, and are, to go beyond the traditional literacy community, and the great activism of bringing literacy to those to can't read and write. Our idea was to indeed move beyond - and bring out the implications and contexts, the reverberations and overtones, the ideas and debates in the philosophy of literacy. Another stage in the movement, a fresh phase of discussion.

Yet let us ask, why literacy itself? People have asked me this over the past months. Why are we stressing its essential relation to selfhood, and our civilization? Why such big, even grand themes organized around, in fact stemming from, such an overused word? Why integrate, involve, such disparate - I almost said desperate - sources and energies for this conference, this search for cohesion, for soulspark, for connection and coherence?

Alphabetic literacy is inextricably joined to the making of the private sphere. This is our inward originality: our personhood, or individual soul. Literacy is connected to the concept of privacy, of solitary space. With literacy comes the articulate private dialogues of the mind. If the inward domain - John Stuart Mill's stirring phrase - is still a value, then literacy must be pivotal, crucial. Consider the imperatives in the word "crucial" - those of choice, of being at the crux. Our comprehension of the uniqueness of each mind, of the possibilities of consciousness, surely springs from *litterata*, the letter. When we try to destroy or inhabit

the mind, we snuff out one more possibility of consciousness and its radical articulations, speculations, reflections, recognitions.

But here is the contradiction: Literacy is also connected to the creation of public space. The intimacies of solitude, of private writing and reading, lead to conversation and controversy, dialectic and probe. The inner need to articulate becomes the outer expression, forums and symposia, and eventually publication and reprint. This is the tradition we find in the *agora*. It is what we find charged behind the concept of the engaged citizen - of the public philosopher, of the poet and performer, of the artist and politician seeking to move the audience to ruminative response or action.

From the beginning of the concept of literacy we see this dual aspect, a contradictory condition. This one word evokes the inward, contemplative realm (singularity, the beat of one's own), and the uttering, or externalizing, of our thoughts and emotions, which must bring enlarged forms of communication and expression, new language and the turbulence of technological extensions.

Emily Dickinson – stark, spare, lonely and audacious soul – wrote of these twin directions, the implications of literacy, in two fragments, one dated 1882 (fragment 1593), and the other undated (fragment 1696). Here she writes:

... this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book – what Liberty
A loosened Spirit brings.

Now here the movement outwards, the rush of free flight. Then:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of Death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –

Observe the movement within. And the devastating puns: in “polar,” conjuring separation and cold outsider air, and in “admitted,” conjuring a hermetic confessional.

•

These twin and yet contrary poles in the word “literacy” are further revealed in the public creation of new languages and new forms. Private minds, those inner sancta, crying out for contact and attachment. Dante’s *vulga*: the diction of his vast *Commedia*, the vision of Beatrice in the streets of Florence moving the poet into forging a common language for his lyric, metaphysical architecture. Wordsworth’s common speech becomes an incendiary manifesto for Romanticism. The modernists, especially James Joyce, turn their private labyrinthine work into multilingual artifacts – the novel and the poem become culture bearers. The exemplary postmodernist fictions– Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* – turn self-consciousness into epic constructs and meditations on transcendental ironies.

Consider the cultural legacies of the American and French Revolutions. There was an outpouring in those times of documents and declarations, pronouncements and polemics, the courageous rhetoric of rights and independence, aimed at an imaginative republic of readers. Our own guiding souls and intelligences were now the true kings and queens. Individual hunger and need led to the demands of a larger literate public. Old systems collapsed, crushed by the call for new representation. Leaflets, letters, newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, novels, and satirical poems circulated: these formed key lifelines for the inner self and its longing for liberty and a responsive, open system.

In all these examples the solitary universe – the confidential realm, that soul admitting to itself – nevertheless longs for a receptive, transforming cosmos of the “loosened Spirit” with its “Bequest of Wings.”

•

Now in our virtual venues, the televisual electroscapes, we are mesmerized by – and sometimes fireballed by – the next movement in the hidden phase of literacy: the cyber-revolution. Book people, like myself, sometimes squirm, often sneer, certainly worry, make dire pronouncements, or wail against “becoming digital,” like lost wilderness souls.

Let us say the cyber-revolution is the confirmation of the long struggle of consciousness – of the mind’s perpetual push from the inner to the outer – the ability to make languages, technologies, structures, forms, those expressions of inward originality, and the need to reach out from that inwardness. What revolutions or rebellions will rise when the public becomes cyber-literate?

The digital transformation is another form of the creation of private and public spheres. We sometimes see this vehemently debated in terms of division, insoluble conflict: screen and image versus word and page; publicity versus privacy. I see these energies and creations as complementary, in the way that physicists would use that word: twin aspects of the same historical human impulse and pulse, the soul’s progress toward the fulfillments of consciousness. Multiple literacies suggest the spreading and evolution of personal sensibility, singular intelligence. The unfolding cosmos does have a destiny, and it is mind.

In my new work on mysticism and media, I find myself venturing into areas of literacy that are at once old, a recollection of origins and lineage, and for me shockingly new, a movement beyond divisive, perhaps pointless polarities. If we are souls, if you accept the premise that we are more than matter and flesh – a premise I accept; many here may not – then it follows that we could treat our endeavors, our creations, whether literacy itself or the machines and mechanics of multiple literacies (book, TV, computer) in a metaphysical context. This would be grounded in the evolution of the sole mind, which is toward the community of souls, loving and liberty. I am haunted by these questions: Could there be, with our simultaneous convergences and agents of traditional literacies and cyber-literacy, a grammar of the cosmos? Where word and image may yet be perceived together in a reunited whole? And could there be a literacy or grammar of silence, of the gaps, of the stillness beyond words and images?

•

Let us say that inside Living Literacies we have the opportunity to make and mark our space and time. We are here to let voices speak, images play – to be not at the mercy of systems that do not serve us, that we think beyond our control. We’re here to be informed, to

inform, to be inside restless metaphoric forms, to enform – a neologism for our event – to envision, to be torn away from preconceptions, to be those selves who could always do more.

Our ethical act – all of us who united, however briefly, to make Living Literacies – is to bring literature, image, conversation, philosophy, polemic, speculation, and dream, book and E-whirl, singing voice and formative and formidable lecture, into one vibrant place. To paraphrase James Joyce's description of his Ulysses, this event is not about something, it is something.

Over these days we won't set limits for ourselves. Civilizations and cultures must be known for their crystalline range of colour, for their tolerance and love for the light though innumerable, individual prisms. We may catch the trace of the uncapturable, the mystery, between the lines. And though surely there will be no agreement here – in fact, I anticipate much disagreement – I hope that there will be that light between words, light behind images, some vision somehow striking us from somewhere beyond the walls of this theatre.

The hidden history of literacy is the soul's route: light between words, light behind images.

B. W. Powe

B. W. Powe is widely regarded as one of the most unconventional and unclassifiable authors in Canadian writing. He is the author of a novel, *Outage: A Journey into Electric City*; a number of non-fiction books, *A Canada of Light*, *The Solitary Outlaw*, and *A Climate Charged*; and even a CD-ROM, *Noise of Time: The Glenn Gould Profile*. Powe teaches at York University. He was the program co-ordinator for the McLuhan and Trudeau conferences at York; and he was also the program coordinator for Living Literacies. He has also been involved with literacy programs at Frontier College. His new books include a volume of poetry, *The Unsaid Passing* (Guernica), and *Media Illuminations* (Penguin Books).