

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

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



Literacy Entrances Everyone it Touches

by Barry Sanders

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**Living Literacies Text of the
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PART TWO: LANGUAGE AND ORALITY

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by Barry Sanders

For the past ten years, I have been on safari. My aim was to explore the two largely uncharted domains of orality and literacy. I have found it difficult enough to grasp the latter, the one in which I spend a great deal of my time, but that other one, so remote and strange, and yet marked by the most familiar of activities – speaking and listening – has eluded me. It may be impossible to enter a world that has been untouched by print. Like a safari, my pursuit was probably wrong-headed, dangerously out of touch with the real action on the ground. I do not know. But I do know that a huge chasm prevents me, a creature of the Book, from seeing over to that far side, where even most experts have a hard time detecting the categories and qualities of primarily oral peoples.

I have been forced to get out of my Range Rover in search of something slightly less stringent but in the end much more realistic and more important for the study of literacy today: I want to uncover the power of the word *within* the context of an alphabetized world. The invigorated word, simply spoken, deeply uttered, intrigues me. For me, the entire project of literacy rests on such speaking.

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This afternoon, I want to turn to a more private enterprise, this one from the late Middle Ages, and to a Carmelite convent called St. Mary of the Angels, in Florence. In August 1582, on the occasion of her sixteenth birthday, Catherine de Pazzi entered the cloister, and immediately re-christened herself Maria Maddalena. Her dates, 1566 to 1607, are a bit modern for my taste but, on account of her assuming the veil, I grant her certain liberties. I have turned to Maria for what she can reveal about the nature of the word as she speaks it with the most potent meaning. Maria's experience comes to us so charged with otherworldliness that it's hard at times to even describe it with conventional grammar.

Periodically, Maria would fall into a rapture, but not to make contact with the Lord. Other mystics have found the divine that way. Maria went deeper: She needed to articulate the Word, that is, the capital word, the word that is Christ. As Maria put it, "the Word's mouth speaks." Such a plan presumes no *audience*, for hers was something other than a performance in that critical sense, of the sort that generally requires an auditor, the performer having to account for her behaviour. Maria had no desire to deliver a string of meaningful, coherent sentences to anyone else. Maria's mouth needed no ear. No evaluation, no validation. Nothing.

We thus cannot call her meditative journey an exercise in communication in any sense, not in the way we commonly use that word, not even in the electronically driven sense in which the computer reduces language to binary bits, and certainly *not* in the religious, *communal* sense. I cannot even call hers an exercise in self-expression, for she had given over her "self," had it vacated – had vacated it – to be replaced by the Living Word. She sought

nothing other than the divinity – her Lord Jesus Christ – entering a solitary soul – Maria Maddalena. She came as close as anyone can, I believe, to embodying what George Steiner calls, in his marvellous book of the same name, a *real presence*.

Despite her wishes and desires that the world in all its forms vacate, however, Maria's trance-talks, her peregrinations in place, resulted in a book. But not by her design. Beyond not wanting an audience, she wanted no response from her sisters. They had other plans. Eavesdropping on Maria's inner dialogues, they jotted down what they heard (what they thought they heard; what they wanted to hear), and then translated those notes not just into prose, but into a coherent, optically organized text, complete with chapters, paragraphs, an emotional trajectory, to a fairly sustained climax – a marriage to the Word – and a modest conclusion. They ordered her seeming disorder, and then sealed their work by giving it a title, *I Colloqui, The Dialogue*.

In her trance, Maria sometimes spoke nonsense. The sisters allowed no such breaches of logic, measuring all her sentences by the rationale, the ratio, of narration. She sometimes sobbed, pulled her hair, cried out loud, stuttered, and stammered. She sat silent for long stretches. None of that made it into the book. They yanked her from one world, orality, into a fairly straightforward kind of literacy, without ever deliberately waking her up. If Maria's rapture may be described by us moderns – postmoderns – as an unconscious encounter, theirs was a highly alert, conscious one. Were those two worlds of orality and literacy interacting with each other? It doesn't seem so, but maybe that's the way they must always play against each other, the nuns, to use the language of politics, in effect colonizing their strange *conversa*.

For her sisters had stolen not just her voice, but her experience. They had translated it, if you will, turning her mystical orality into recognizable Italian. Moreover, they had made it permanent, providing a record for posterity, *story* slipping into *history*. Maria reacted violently. Learning that her sisters had made of her inner dialogue a public document, she searched out all the leaves of the book she could find and tossed them into the fireplace. Her sisters, thinking that Maria had lost her mind, found better and more obscure hiding places for their treasure, some of the pages lost for hundreds of years.

Maria speaks – and I use *speaks* here to mean something different from the sentences she typically uttered – Maria speaks on another level, with another kind of orality – one that breaks the usual constraints of grammar. For example, she relates the desire of the Word to have His being summoned. And summoned solely by Maria. Her words *are* – I am reduced to the inertness of such a verb to capture the vibrancy of the relationship – her words are the breathing substance of the heavenly non-being. She reveals God not through language, but in language. The spirit of the divine cannot be expressed in mere words, she insists, but only in her oral utterances – the Holy Lord finding substance in phonemes. She speaks as if writing had never been invented. For prose blasphemes the word, as she knows it. The stillness of prose – the very fact of words tethered to the page, enabling readers to criticize, analyze, fight against, interpret, and reject sentence after sentence – the very fact of literacy, that is, denies existence to the Other. The reader usurps authority by setting aside the author and taking control of the experience: the reader can slow the action down, skip sentences, even slam the book closed. Maria's Lord has total hold of her. The nuns produced a lower ordering of prose, something quite corrupted from the glory that Hugh of Saint Victor and others promote in the divine contemplation of the text.

I do not know what that cloistered editorial board, Maria's sisters, had in mind. We do not have their explicit thoughts. But I want to suggest that they might have re-cognized in

Maria's meditations the utter meaning that they so adamantly searched for elsewhere. That is, they hoped to create a text, a page, that in its re-citation – making the words audible again – would reveal God's presence.

Maria is speaking in such a context, in such a particular way, that no document, not even a word-for-word transcription, could capture the transaction, for she intends no communication; for she intends the words to immediately and fully evaporate; for her utterances are divinely inspired and divinely expired. She needs the words to leave her mouth and then to have them leave entirely and completely. In silence, the Holy Ghost lingers.

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I have tried to take the title of our conference – Living Literacies – seriously. I even acknowledge *living* as both adjective and verb. Maria Maddalena has been dead for nearly four hundred years. What can she possibly tell us? After such spectacular hospitality on the part of our hosts, I do not feel comfortable offering an example of *dead* or *dying* literacies. I resuscitate that long-dead Italian because I believe she speaks the word in the way, the only way, it *could* be spoken at certain moments – with the transcendent presence of The Other. Even her sisters, I believe, envied her. Maria reminds us of a time when people had the ability, the power, to speak words charged with ultimate meaning – when words reverberated with The Other.

I am not foolish enough to think that such a time can be recovered. But I do know that the door to The Other remains decidedly open for children, most of whom come into the world in love with sheer nonsense – with the thrill of making sounds – and move slowly, gradually, into more nuanced, mannered, and more understandable utterances. The propensity for the undiluted, penetrating remark, remains the privilege of the child. Children speak in disregard of any social filter. As adults, we are continually astonished at their comments. Where did she or he get *that*, we ask. Who taught this child that? No one, of course. The child speaks with a totally unauthorized mouth; and listens with fully authorized ears, for the weirdest of things – rhyme, sound, pitch, silliness, for funny stuff and friendly noises.

Most children inhabit a totally plastic and fully alive world. Language is brand new, and delightfully fun. Kids love to speak it backwards, in Pig Latin, to distort its meaning in code. Cold weather lets them mark their own breath. Through its youngest speakers, language gets refreshed. But, like an incoming tide, daily life erodes and erases the transcendent. The world moves faster and faster. We sprout tin ears. Language fades.

Maria meditated. She sat still and she meditated. These days, there is not much chance for meditation – actual or metaphoric. There's just too much movement; we're awash in movement – extreme, virtual movement at that, directed at and delivered most effectively and efficiently at the youngest audiences, by electronic technology, in video games, Game Boys, computers and TV. In my country, to make kids sit still, doctors prescribe drugs, the sedative of choice is Ritalin. I am interested in looking at the extreme edge of this kind of movement, a brand of virtual movement that electronic technology has whipped into a frenzy, and that goes by the name of *excitement*. Under such conditions, stillness is impossible; and meditative stillness is absolutely essential, at certain moments, for true literacy.

Let me first say something about the oddity of the word, and why I have settled on it. *Excite* derives from Latin *excitare*, to awaken, to call forth, instigate, set in motion. The

word has no antecedent in Anglo-Saxon, appearing for the first time, in English, in the fourteenth century, as a decidedly religious term, in a kind of mystical grammatical construction: "The singing of the psalms excites the angels to our help." The angels get sung into being. They wing *our* way on a melody of our making. From that early use of the word, as a verb, *excite* gets taken over by the Scientific Revolution, turned into a noun, *excitation*, to describe a state of electrical or magnetic attraction.

Through analogy, the word moves, in the seventeenth century, to physiology. First used by Shakespeare, *excitement* comes tinged with a sense of aberrant behaviour. Hamlet utters it in this new sense, in the fourth act, fourth scene, of his play: "How stand I then, that have father killed, a mother stained, Excitements of my reason, and my blood."

That complements – in the sense of completing – his famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy – Hamlet trying to decide what it means to be human, what it means to act. Or, perhaps more precisely, *how* to act. In his madness, or feigned madness, things come to tap him on the shoulder, events bombard him – he has visitations, perhaps from angels, perhaps from demons. He fears they may be the same. He is frightened, desperately aware of needing to do something, but awkwardly frozen in place. He cannot move, but he is fully ready to move. Hamlet, like a filament in a light bulb, has passed into a state of excitation. To be and not to be at the very same time.

The "to be or not to be" speech, for me, then, is less an exploration of suicide and more an exquisite rendering of a state of pure potentiality, where anything (or everything) is possible. It's neither action nor inaction, but the sheer tingling excitement of being alive – with all of its attendant problems and possibilities, fears and failures – a twinning of the self. But that moment in the word's history fades fast. Who can sustain such a raffling excitement? By the nineteenth century, physicians use *excitement* to denote a state of abnormal activity, a pathology in any organ.

In the modern sense, Hamlet is turned on. Excitement comes to turn us all on. We are not passive agents in the face of it. We invoke it. Does Hamlet like the state of excitement? I do not know. Clearly, he helps to bring it on. He certainly *feels* alive, so alive, so electrically charged, that he cannot stand it. Contrary to most interpretations, that Hamlet feels dead and emasculated, I say he feels too much alive. He lives in that liminal state suspended between being and non-being, alive at an emotional midnight hour. I know that at least some of us in the room have experienced that state, reading a great writer's sentences and having to drop the book, not out of regret or repulsion, but because the pages just take your breath away and you need for the moment to stop. If it were two hundred years earlier – during Maria Maddalena's time – and I would say Hamlet had fallen into a rapture – conscious and unconscious at the same time – in contact with something otherworldly.

The soliloquy suggests a Hamlet *beside* himself, one who stands outside himself talking to his self. Like Maria Maddalena, he is mad but north-northwest – slightly, momentarily off. Hamlet more than feels. In his immobilized state, he finds his deepest emotion. I do not say this to make cute etymological distinctions. Emotion had not yet appeared in the language, coming some seventy or eighty years after *Hamlet*, in 1692, in a book by the political philosopher, John Locke, titled *On Education*.

It is a curious word, *emotion*, first cousin to excitement. Feelings need proximity; the idea inheres in the word itself. But emotions need no such intimacy to set them spinning and churning. I can be touched from great distances. I can be moved without being physically touched. Emotion grows out of an internalized motion. Likewise, emotion causes motion,

moves me to action. To be touched carries two meanings; to be moved carries two meanings. None of this can happen without a highly active imagination, a rich, deep interior life.

Excitement operates differently from emotion. Excitement arrives as both stimulation *and* emotion – one undifferentiated charge, a loud *wow*, a “rush,” young people call it. It comes in such a powerful, massive way, it’s difficult for a person, especially a young person, to have any nuanced emotional response. When we are young, emotion requires *absolute* motion. Learning to stand up, to walk, literally turns into a *trip*. Slightly later for young people, excitement means going *somewhere*, some amusement park, for instance, where, because of the rides, parks become perpetual-motion machines.

I apologize for the drawn-out observations. I wanted to show something of the journey that excitement took from its earliest religious incarnation, to its disturbing enfleshment in the seventeenth century, to all forms of contemporary entertainment – fast action, nastily violent entertainment. These days, to tell from popular entertainment, killing is exciting: car chases, train and plane crashes, mayhem and torture – all exciting. *Fear Factor*, *Survivor*, *Extreme Games* – anything is fair game that brings people to the brink, to the clear expectation that something gruesome and bloody just might, with a little bit of luck, fill the totality of whatever screen they just happen to be watching. The titillation of disaster (how many times an hour did the Twin Towers collapse on television the day of September 11, 2001?) triggers in us an excitation. Of course the Twin Towers and even the White House had already blown into smithereens long before 9/11, in films like *Independence Day*.

In the Middle Ages, people invoked excitement, they called it forward, controlled it, by singing the psalms. Nowadays, we push a button, flip a switch, swallow a pill, inject with a needle, to have it pay a visit – and the age of the agent does not seem to matter. The images come flying – hundreds, thousands of images, relentlessly come flying at us. The imagination becomes a warehouse for storing, rather than an instrument for conjuring. One has to shake off the rush of simulated reality. But it’s hard to return to a world washed clean of special effects. The images linger from the electronic realm, the emotions still stirred, demanding some discharge.

I have also argued that the best, most strenuous exercise of the imagination comes through reading. But reading is slow and cumbersome; it lacks the pizzazz of thrill rides, extreme sports, and video games. Open a page: everything’s flat and utterly still. The words do not move. If anything moves, it’s the reader. Just watch kids fidget when they read; they follow the words and rock, like Hassidic Jews praying in *shul*. Kids love to move; they need to. It’s in their bodies that they find the rhythm of prose. After all, the music’s called rock and roll. Hip hop. (The metre of poetry is divided into feet, and those feet derive their names from dance steps.)

But the great, important movement remains out of view, invisible, acted out in the mind’s eye, or played out in the mind’s living room or rumpus room, or even gymnasium. The reason so many novels and poems and fairy tales involve pilgrimages, voyages, and road trips – from Chaucer to Kerouac – is that movement means that time has passed, and elapsed time implies change – emotional change, one of the hardest things to dramatize. We see Huck as a different boy at the end of his drift down the Mississippi – he thinks differently, he feels different. He knows it. He wants more. He cannot get any bigger without lighting out for the territory. Immensity is all. America’s the place to expand. It always has been.

The metaphors we use to capture the nature of thought: I *came* to this decision, I arrived at this conclusion, let me *walk* you through this argument. In the Renaissance, people devised mnemonic tricks as memory aides. The favourite one turned the inside of one's head into a house, divided it into rooms, and placed objects from a list that one wished to memorize in those rooms. To recall the list, one merely walked through each room and re-collected the objects. Three hundred years ago, people played with interior space; it became a form of entertainment.

When a thirteen year-old girl with the code name Genie arrived at the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) office in Monrovia, California, in 1977, she walked – no, she negotiated space – with her arms extended in front of her. Her father had kept her locked in a room twenty-four hours a day, strapped to a potty seat in the daytime and to her bed at night. No one spoke to her – ever. She had no toys. She never went outside, never looked outside. No illumination in her room. She had *no* language. She also had no depth perception. She moved through the world, not with her mouth and mind, but with her arms and hands. Kasper Hauser, too, a young boy who emerged from the forest in early nineteenth-century Germany, experienced reality in two dimensions. He knew only grunts and groans. The world, he later reported, looked like someone had tossed buckets of coloured paint against the wall. Think about diagramming sentences – grammar suspends sentences in space. A distance separates subject from verb from object. Barely visible from where we stand at the subject end of the sentence, far out there waits the lonely, dependent object.

In that space, thoughts move. In that space, ideas work themselves out. That mentalized, interiorized space gets generated in the act of silent reading. Silent of course misstates the case, because internal vocalization excites images in just the way singing excites angels. Why not think of angels and images as similar – messengers from another world? I set my ideas in motion through excitement. Excitement gets me going.

Excitement is movement. Movement – motion, e-motion – requires an excitation. For me, this occurs most powerfully in reading. As a preparation for entertaining an entire range of emotions, young people get their training in orality – in stories that they hear out loud, that they make up themselves, in being read to out loud, in reading out loud to themselves, in reading silently, and finally, hopefully, in their desire to write their own stories. Wordsworth's walking, talking ramble with his sister Dorothy in his poem "The Prelude" has the same spatial, mobile, emotional drive, as Dante's circular stroll on his way to Paradise. Emerson takes his talk outside in his famous essay "Walking." One space – exterior – maps onto another – interior. Against a backdrop of a deeply personal, idiosyncratic orality, electronic technology works to sever the nexus of language that young people need and enjoy so much.

No wonder that, compared with moving pictures, pulsing pixels, and streaming videos, the word reading sounds terribly old fashioned and creaky. If the book moves, we as readers must make the letters dance. But try to explain that to a youngster. What to do? For it's in reading that I'm convinced young people learn not just to exert some control over their world, but to re-shape it, as well. I want to conjure something better, more demanding, than "The Terminator." I want to imagine something more hopeful than terror versus anti-terror. We must reach beyond good guys versus bad guys.

Manufactured, packaged and processed, technologically powered excitement is corrosive to lived experience. It has helped to rob the everyday and the mundane – the ordinary objects and events of daily life, the most commonplace of things – of their divine presence. More

than that, the new velocity of narration, storytelling as a top-speed, extreme event, driven by special effects, stifles young people from telling their own stories. How can they compete with the perfect simulation of power? Just as Maria's highly literate sisters imposed their rules on her, so electronic technology denies young people their own voice.

Young people are sleepwalking – deprived of the regularity of breathing, and the phenomenology of seeing that the deepest levels of orality promote. And orality is good at hiding its excitement: speaking, conversing, storytelling, all creep at a petty pace; ideas repeat themselves, double back on themselves. Events exist and do not exist; they're true and not true. Kids troop about in a dreamy state. Sometimes nobody's home, inspiration gets exhausted. The spirit flags.

Young people now expect the world to resemble in sight and sound a game of Doom or Sniper, or, perhaps knowing that it cannot, find lived experience a pale facsimile compared with the special effects version of it. The world and its copy have traded places, the simulation more powerful than the actual.

Excitement has replaced the richness of interior space. It's an internalized thrill ride, excitement is, and it works best when the self has been weakened. The enjoyment of the supernatural, Coleridge said, demanded the willing suspension of disbelief; excitement requires no act so deliberate – willingness and suspension both beside the point.

In the past, I have argued that young people must be taken out of their illiterate limbos – neither oral nor literate are they – and brought back to orality to start all over – from the beginning. Now, I believe it's important to pull young people out from their world of virtual movement and bring them back into that interior space, that meditative space, where motion and emotion begin their journey. In my country, youngsters gobble up Big Macs, Biggie Fries, and Super-Size Cokes. The amount they consume is staggering, not just in numbers, but in calories, as well. How can young people not grow fatter and fatter, ingesting huge amounts of calories with the *impression*, the *illusion*, that they have gone through great activity and movement just by watching it happen on the screen? While the movement may be virtual, the obesity is shockingly real. Is it possible that living in the virtual, electronic world of heavy-duty excitement creates the illusion that one needs more and more fuel?

Let us substitute one kind of orality – consumption – for another kind, one where youngsters practice their sense of timing, their sense of humor, where they can learn to love the power of a few words, or a quip, a couple of well-turned sentences, an image – where they come face to face with the thrill of language. All this oral activity in anticipation of, in preparation for reading and writing. It's in that oral state that interior space gets nurtured, as a preparation for young people coming into a fuller and more mature state – in literacy.

This is dangerous stuff, this culture of excitement. It may have even eroded some important elements of adult life. For many people seem to have lost the ability to understand or comprehend anymore the most aggressive and all-consuming form of action and movement – war itself. It's too remote, too highly technologized, and, for the most part, too *clean*. We know war best when something goes wrong, and then only for a flash. And only as an adjunct – something called collateral damage. But more than that, I suspect, no, I fear, the declaration of war may be just another one of those things, among scores of others, like wild movies, super-fast cars, high-octane fuel, that keeps the air crackling with excitement.

Advertisers use the phrase “high-powered” to sell all manner of things – cars, coffee, alcohol, salsa, and rifles.

Books cannot compete with the box office or B-1 bombers. But taking our students, no matter their age, back to a state of orality, to the free and easy, sheer pleasurable dance of words – *logopoeia*, as Ezra Pound calls it – can launch a young person on one of the most exciting journeys he or she can ever undertake. For literacy always begins in orality, and orality begins in a kind of meditative stillness. In the past, when someone asked me what I thought my task was as a teacher, I said, “to keep students awake during the electronic revolution.” I wanted students who could speak truth to power. We are in a new world now. I now want young people who have the courage of the word, and the conviction of the heart, to speak up for *peace*.

What a strange state of affairs, that the perfect, fortified defense against outright attacks of exciting violence should find its match in the most basic, evanescent, precious, most invisible and at the same time most actual stuff—human breath.

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