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DJELAL KADIR

Of Letters and Literacy

I'm quite illiterate, but I read
a lot. (J.D. Salinger)

We arrive at our literacy word for word, which is to say verbatim as well as through exchange, a give and take neither predictably reciprocal nor reliably mutual.¹ Literacy is an ambiguous and embattled complex. It may well be the most egregious instance of that difficulty the ancient rhetors dubbed an aporia. The intricacies of epistemology aside, the knowledge and repertoire referred to as literacy comprise a political and cultural field of contention, where the phenomenon of literacy and its sundry elements contest among themselves. Literacy is a form of consensual knowing, and the formative elements of that consensus comprise what is deemed necessary to be known. As such, literacy is supremely suppositious. It comprises a congeries of presumptions deemed sufficiently shared within a cultural context as to be taken for granted and go without saying. That literacy is a desirable condition is not usually disputed; nor is the formative nature of literacy's process a point of contention. But while there may be relatively ready consensus on knowing as a desideratum and agreement on the fact that the precepts of that repertorial mastery are formative, the consensus runs into difficulty on the constitution of literacy. Insofar as the constitutive and the performative, or the content and the process, inextricably mesh, the discussion on what comprises literacy invariably runs into questions of how literacy is achieved and exercised.

Since knowing and knowing better have historically been basic to human cultures, literacy figures among the most defining topics of controversy, especially among those who are deemed to indeed know better. It would appear that the better we know the more we contend, and knowing better more often than not exacerbates any tenuous equilibrium among the content we command, the contention this elicits, and the contentment we may seek.

Since knowing and knowing better have historically been basic to human cultures, literacy figures among the most defining topics of controversy, especially among those who are deemed to indeed know better. It would appear that the better we know the more we contend, and knowing better more often than not exacerbates any tenuous equilibrium among the content we command, the contention this elicits, and the contentment we may seek.

1 This article was delivered as a keynote address for the joint plenary session of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association / Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée, the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, and the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English at the annual conference of the Canadian Learned Societies (Memorial University, St. John's, June 1997).

What does it mean, then, to know better in terms of literacy as a generally agreed upon desideratum? The comparative "better," whether as qualitative quotient or as unavoidable ethical imperative, is instructive in formulating the question, because it points to a basic human impulse in the phenomenon of literacy. This is the comparative impulse that pushes us into a fractious arena of culture where an agonistic and relative counterpoint obliges us to consider that merely knowing is not enough, that knowing better is a more sufficient and necessary condition and, in the extreme, knowing best is not only a superlative, but an optimal desideratum for those who can easily co-exist with the privilege of absolutes and the dicta of categorical imperatives.

Inasmuch as we embody and are inextricably vested in literacy's conditions, those of us engaged in the furtherance of literacy are not immune to the inevitability of this drift. Our predicament inexorably devolves upon the question of how we can know what there is to know, even as we symptomatically embody the suppositions of that process and its object of knowledge. The question, though vexing, seems to have rarely impeded our efforts and, taking heart in the injunction writ on the Delphic temple, "Know thyself," we place ourselves, or so we believe, beyond the injunction's conundrums and we claim, from the privileged locus of that relative remove, not just to know, but to know better, with the comparative augmentation as index of our self-conscious, critical reflexivity.

How much better do we know, those of us who claim to, or are expected to, know better? We could generally agree that our cultural scruples interdict the arrogance of claiming to know best. This much better we do know. Whether we heed that interdiction in practice is a different issue, of course, one that often complicates matters and strains politesse.

To answer the question of how much better we do know in terms of literacy, we would have to demonstrate a modicum of insight into the ironic, and even paradoxical, nature of the task, since we need always be alert to the fact that it is literacy itself that enables us to posit the question in the first place. We have to divulge, as well, an awareness of the entailments that compel a dialogue between knowing and knowing better. With due alertness to these preconditions, then, we must admit that literacy would indeed have us merely know, even as it prompts us into knowing better. In more formulaic terms, literacy obliges us to view its imperatives at once as normative and as critical. Whether we dub this a mauiatic counterpoint after Socrates, or a dialogical ambivalence by Bakhtinian reckoning, we are absolved neither from betraying the symptoms, nor from the need to articulate the ambivalences of literacy's simultaneous equivocations.

We cannot, that is, escape the condition of being normative instances of literacy and, at the same time, the critically articulate subjects of its predicates. We are caught, ineluctably, in the acts of literacy's practice and, though we may theorize our "differential positionality," as the argot goes, into comparative claims of knowing better, or even into superlative theoretical injunctions like

Gerald Graff's "Teach the Conflicts," for example, that enjoin us to teach the elements of/in contention, to "teach the conflicts," as he puts it, if consensus elude us, we are still literacy's actors caught in the act. And, as comparatists, though modesty compels us to disclaim the hierarchical valorization of the comparative in favor of the differential, that is, even if we claim to know differently rather than better, our acts of engagement in comparativity and differentiation implicitly distinguish us, in a valorative sense, from those who do not engage in such acts. If we do not value what we opt to do over what we do not do, or if we were not part of a guild or cultural consensus that determines we do certain things a certain way, we would not do so, obviously, unless we were perverse. And those said to be given to the per-verse by this reckoning are, in fact, those who take to their literacy a verse at a time in disjunctive dissonance and isolate alienation from the sense of the whole, however arguable that literacy's sense of the wholesome may be.

I have sought thus far to impress upon you the fact that literacy is a problem as opposed to a universally accepted given, and that we exacerbate its problematic nature in reflecting back on literacy's mirror that frames us. I shall endeavor to explore some of the possible reasons why this should be so. In the process, I shall consider literacy in its relation to a number of phenomena with which it is usually associated, namely, culture, writing, reading, and literature.

The roads to culture are littered with literacy. I posit this sentence as a historically sustainable premise. I do so not only in the sense of Walter Benjamin's stunned, and mortal, realization in the seventh of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which, as you will recall, reads: "There has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarity" (556). I consider this premise to be sustainable as well by the multiple intricacies of literacy, intricacies that range from the alphabetic to the theological, from the epistemology of conceptual self-definition to the axioms of political and cultural self-justification.

E.D. Hirsch, in his best-selling *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* a decade ago, was not the first to yoke literacy to culture. Almost fifty years earlier, at a time when a particular kind of literacy and a particular culture (and we should note, parenthetically, that all literacy and every culture are particular, in both instances a particularity with an irrepressible ambition for the universal), almost fifty years earlier, Ernst Robert Curtius countered the apocalyptic and millenarian conflation of that moment's ascendant literacy and culture with another millennial convergence of culture and literacy. To the Fascist barbarity of the time, Curtius counterposed an idealized Greek civilization of Antiquity and its peculiar accommodations in the Latin Middle Ages. Curtius noted that Greek culture was inextricably bound with the epic texts of its pedagogical literacy, a conjunction whose example and legacy endure and perennially animate modest proposals for the salvation of our times.

Like most convergences that aggregate, the conflation of culture and literacy amounts to a pleonasm and, like most pleonasm, this one too has a surfeit. The pleonasm consists in the doubly determinative conjugation of two strongly normative phenomena — culture and literacy. The domestication implicit in the first and the formative impulse of the second combine into an authoritative, and often authoritarian instrumentality (which is to say, an instrument instructing mentality), capable of subsuming every aspect of human existence. The pleonastic surfeit is comprised of the inevitable ironies that totalizations spawn as safety mechanisms that mock, if not altogether redeem totality, as Linda Hutcheon has eloquently noted in her study of irony's edge.

Culture, whether high or low, is by definition exclusionary. True to its Latin etymology, it cultivates a certain ground and a particular norm or set of norms, which is to say it weeds out what it deems undesirable and takes in what it considers appropriate for inclusion and racination. The inclusions are bound by commonality and conformity to a standard no matter how broad or narrow its range. The prevailing tendency of cultures is to see to their own continuity, which means the constant cultivation of criteria and characteristics that perpetuate the common grounds that comprise and comprehend a culture's formations. In this sense, cultures are strongly centripetal and self-serving. And if culture is fundamentally a form of self-presentation rendered natural, representation is cultured in the extreme, though certain forms of representation be given to deformation and counter-discourse, and this notwithstanding postmodernism's belated revelry which is, perforce, another symptomatic manifestation of a particular culture.

Cultures may not tend to consider as apposite to themselves all that is left outside their ken. They do manifest, however, some degree of awareness, whether as gnawing prescience or as self-reflexive knowledge, that while what commonly defines them may not be apposite to their common exclusions, it is invariably oppositional to them. This is the quotient of alterity that even the most self-privileging and self-convinced cultures realize as the inevitable otherness that defines them by contradiction. And it is also the incipient stage of a realization that leads to forms of accommodation, tolerance, and acceptance even, of multiplicities that differ from the uniformity of a culture's binding formations.

Self-definition through the criteria of multiplicity, diversity, and/or difference is yet another form of consensus by which certain cultures distinguish themselves, yet another particularity that would, of course, deem its own ethos as optimal desideratum among cultural particulars and, thus, tend, like all cultures in human history, toward seeing itself as paradigm of the good and the universal. This is not a judgment or a capitulation to nihilistic relativity, but a historical and anthropological observation, to the degree, that is, that any anthropos can anthropologize, an admission intended neither as irony nor as self-exculpation, but one which, alas, condemns one to the ironic and proscribes absolution nonetheless. The foregoing may well be an inevitable statement of

cultural literacy, of course, a symptom of our own particularity.

If culture is, tautologically enough, a self-cultivating and self-perpetuating human construct that forms its members into conformity, literacy may be the most masterful instrument through which a culture's members are articulated into formation. Because, literacy is not simply the mastery of a culturally defined corpus. It is, as well, or even more strongly, the mastering of those who are authenticated as literate and cultured. The mastered corpus implicates those who master it. It does so as the corpus delicti that points to its own authorities as parties responsible for and to it.

Dante suggests as much in his *Convivio* (IV,vi), when he traces the term *autore* to the Greek *autentin*. He glosses the Greek *lexis* as "che tanto vale in latino quanto 'degno di fede e d'obbedienza'" (which in Latin is tantamount to 'deserving of trust and obedience'). Dante's Greek etymon (and the Florentine is purported to have known Greek only through his Latin) *autentin* is also linked to authentication and to responsibility, as when something is authentic because made by one's own hand, an attribution of red-handed responsibility which would eventually become associated with the forensic and the juridical corroboration of guilt, that is, the identification of the "author of the crime." To partake of literacy, then, is to be authorized to account for, and be held accountable to, the authority conferred by literacy's sanction.

As instrument of acculturation, literacy derives its own authorization from the culture it perpetuates by purveying the conditions - and conferring the instrumentality, representational and tacit, through which culture defines its grounds of legitimacy and encodes its enablements. Culture and literacy, then, are locked in a mutually reinforcing relationship, a relationship compelling enough to have been remarked by scholars and critics as diverse as E. D. Hirsch, in his already mentioned treatise, and Wlad Godzich in his 1994 book *The Culture of Literacy*. The inextricably commensurate relationship between culture and literacy renders the sniping between the belated adherents of cultural studies and the acolytes of immaculate literature rather specious. At bottom, such shrill exchanges serve as enactments of cultural self-confrontation that emanate from the gripping relationship between culture and literacy. And, if in their own respective registers Hirsch elides critical process and privileges the content of cultural literacy, while Godzich deconstructs the ideological investments and foregrounds the relentlessly repercussive entailments of a process that would deem itself completed, theirs is a culture's dialogue in the course of shaping the facets of its edifications and schooling its literacies. In any case, the interlocutors of this dialogue manifest, symptomatically, the transactions of culture and literacy as they negotiate a course that leads toward, even if it does not always arrive at, a consensual ground where certain conventions or norms go without saying.

Strongly normative as they are, then, both culture and literacy ultimately

impel their initiates toward their ideal goal, where saying yields to silence and contention to tacit consensus, if not to universal conformity. In this regard, the ultimate danger of Gerald Graff's injunction to "teach the conflicts" lies in the idealization of the improbable stasis where, once learned, differences are resolved and the agency of a culture's contending subjects is, in turn, absolved from contention. Most ominous of all is the self-absolution, or the illusion of absolution, from conflict of those who do "teach the conflicts."

If relentless pursuit of self-differentiation condemns one to self-centered monadism and social irrelevance, unmitigated conformity may not translate to much more than absolute banality, and the programmatic elision of difference may well be the surest path to indifference, cultural and otherwise. Like the proverbial scions of Matthew Arnold's English aristocracy, then, the properly cultured and duly literate would be bound not by what they consciously know and do, but by what they have commonly forgotten. They would be bound, that is, by the tacit imperatives and inarticulate taciturnity of what goes without saying. This too would be the logical fate of content-based crusades of cultural literacy, whether Hirsch's or of those whose agenda militates for the preeminence of a particular list, or, for that matter, of those who champion so-called "basic skills" and hector market-driven literacies at the expense of critical process and to the exclusion of contestatory theoretical reflection.

If culture and literacy function in tandem to forge a double bind whose instrumentality aims at normative domestication and binding conformity, what, then, of the binomial literacy and literature?

If the command of a particular literature is the measure of literacy in any given culture, literacy itself, as I have already suggested in referring to the etymologizing Dante of the *Convivio*, is what defines literature as literature. One's command of literature, in other words, is commanded by the institutional givens of literacy. One may be considered literate because of one's literary repertoire, but that repertorial configuration and its content are determined by what literacy in a given culture is deemed to consist in. Put yet another way, what is deemed to be literature derives its institutional sanction from the normative and formative imperatives of a historical context's cultural literacy. Contrary to conventional understanding, literacy in this sense is not an end or a state to which one attains, but an authoritative agency that determines its elements and certifies its initiates. The fact that we commonly understand this process in reverse is not accidental. It is in the nature of determinative authority to naturalize its own immanence as inevitable result and as natural necessity rather than as preeminent cause.

Like the *deus absconditus* of Gnosis, the causal exertions of literacy become occluded, with its consequential effects foregrounded as desiderata whose fulfillment elides the constitutive determinacies that shaped the process and its content. Once the corpus of literature takes on consensual legitimacy, the role of

literacy as instituting agency is all but ensconced behind the manifest symptoms of its effects, with the canonical repertory it made possible functioning as metonymy for literacy's institutional enablements. Literacy at this stage refers solely to the achieved result rather than the enabling imperatives which made its outcome inevitable. By the time literature is considered and designated as such, literacy has accomplished its task. Our formation at the terminus of that process would have us say, instead, that literacy has been achieved by us. To what extent we may be the object predicate rather than the subject of the process is a measure largely veiled to us. Our only hope for any degree of discretionary agency as subjects in this process is pre-literature, that is, a stage when writing has yet to be instituted as literature or as "letters."

For, if literature is literacy's domestic handmaiden, writing prior to that anointed status remains a wild card. And if literature and letters are already "grammatical" by virtue of the sanctions that engender and incorporate them into a corpus and its lettered constitution, writing in the acts of writing remains unassimilated and idiosyncratic. In their Greek etymological valence, the *grammata* are not quite *grammatika*, and not yet within the purview of those wardens of literacy known as the *grammatikoi*, whether they be the jail wardens of the prison house of language, the political enforcers of academic syllabi, or the legislators of canonical syllabification. No one is immune, of course, to their determinative precepts, and even when a J.D. Salinger writes, "I'm quite illiterate, but I read a lot," those protocols of institutional "grammaticality" flaunted by the writer would fate his own writing, *malgré lui*, to a status of domesticity as literature and as quaint *bric-à-brac* of literacy's canon. For writing, however volatile, is in good measure already lettered and home-grown and sanctimoniously lofted on literacy's litter.

Obviously, I am not the first to be pressing the differentiation between writing as exploratory process and literature as an institution. In the past three decades, however, we have come to understand something more than a dichotomous structure in that Gallic binary of *écriture et littérature*. Most significantly, we have come to appreciate *écrire* as more than an intransitive verb, as Barthes' formulation would have it. We have come to understand that writing perforce must be transitive and transactive, if, that is, our literacies are to be more than self-centered circumscriptions, and if we are to have any chance of salvaging letters from the orthodox strictures of literacy or redeem the *grammata* from the doxology of the cultural grammarian. If our reading and interpretive endeavors aim to redeem literature from its clericaly, our recourse to the acts of writing themselves has to be a salvaging of writing at a stage of contestation and a glimpse, however furtive, of the performative as it is essentialized by/into the formative.

This is not to deny that writing as an institutionalized act and literacy as an instituting project have not enjoyed a symbiotic relationship that has been

mutually reinforcing. The Canadian scholar Nicholas Hudson conscientiously documents for us such institutional and cultural self-privileging through writing's *métier* in his 1994 book *Writing and European Thought 1600-1830*. Invoking Nahum Tate, England's poet laureate of the second half of the seventeenth century, Hudson observes, "few have questioned the title of writing as 'sovereign queen' of the sciences, for this invention has made all the learned arts possible. Writing has been considered the very emblem of 'civilization,' a sign of the intellectual superiority of the West, and a justification for Europe's ascendancy over pre-literate, 'savage' nations" (1).

The first writer of international distinction to have been born among such "pre-literate" peoples in the American colonies, the Peruvian Inca Garcilaso de la Vega had already appreciated as much a half century before Nahum Tate, despite other elaborate forms of "literacy" in his highly ceremonial native Inca culture. In Book 1, Chapters 18 and 19 of *The Royal Commentaries*, a genealogical history of the Inca empire written in the author's European exile and published in 1609, Inca Garcilaso relates how he queried his uncle the Inca Emperor on his peoples' past. In the process, he betrays an acute insight into the role of writing as mechanism of cultural legacy and as instrument of empire and civilization:

Inca, my uncle, though you have no writings to preserve the memory of past events, what information have you of the origin and beginnings of our kings? For the Spaniards and the other peoples who live on their borders have divine and human histories from which they know when their own kings and neighbor's kings began to reign and when one empire gave way to another. They even know how many thousand years it is since God created heaven and earth. All this and much more they know through their books. But you, who have no books, what memory have you preserved of your antiquity? Who was the first of our Inca? What was he called? What was the origin of his line? How did he begin to reign? With what men and arms did he conquer this great empire? How did our heroic deeds begin?

For the first time in the annals of European history a native of a conquered and colonized region records his insight into the nature of writing, history, the founding of civilization, and the intricate web into which these elements are woven. He betrays an understanding not only of the crucial role of writing in its exercise as historiography, but also into the consequences of the absence of these in a given culture. He understands the fact that the absence of a narrative discourse, particularly a scriptive narration, leaves a culture without a history and, hence, with no legitimate grounds to counter proprietary claims of conquest and colonization.

In this regard, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega is as much a creature of the European Renaissance as are the style of his prose and the wiliness of his discretion. He was a contemporary of Shakespeare and Cervantes. He died on the

24th day of that cruelest of Aprils in the year 1616, shortly after Cervantes's and Shakespeare's nearly contemporaneous deaths. While writing and historical narrative as instruments of cultural self-legitimation may not be original with the Renaissance, writing and historiography are indeed codified and their ideological program systematically deployed for this very purpose, starting with Antonio de Nebrija's first Spanish and, quite likely, first written grammar of a modern European language in 1492 that expressly yokes grammar to empire as Europe embarks on an imperial era across the oceans and into the New World.

Having dealt with the questions of scripture, history, ideology, and conquest for more than a decade, I shall not rehearse myself on these issues which have now become commonplaces of academic discourse on postcoloniality. Suffice it to say that Inca Garcilaso de la Vega sees quite clearly that if as a culture you have no writing then you have no history, and if you have no history then you do not certifiably exist. His own writing project, then, is a form of cultural certification and the self-certification of a half-cast who could otherwise only half exist. Thus, when the English poet laureate Nahum Tate referred to writing as "the sovereign queen" some decades after Inca Garcilaso, he had ample historical precedent for knowing full well the multiple entailments of sovereignty as implied by/in writing's literacy and its advantages.

Still under the aegis of Nahum Tate, Nicholas Hudson's remarks continue where we left him to turn to Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, who, by the way, like Cervantes and Europe's first modern grammarian Antonio de Nebrija, receives no mention in Hudson's otherwise conscientious treatise: "But the cost of these [writing's] advantages has been the evils released by writing in its alternate role (to Pallas) as 'Pandora' of humanity — the theological dissensions, useless learning, bookish insolence, philosophical scepticism, and general loss of intimacy and directness of living speech" (1). As Shakespeare's twin Veronese gentlemen would have it, "And yet, and yet...."

The intricate ambivalence of literate cultures toward writing is a venerable topos whose initial treatment we tend to trace to Plato's pharmakon medicine cabinet, whose Rx, in turn, remands us even farther back to Egyptian lore. Thus, a resistance in and to literacy comes to us since time immemorial in the heart of the *grammata*, that is, in literacy's very letters themselves. In this respect grammar itself contains the seeds of its own volatility, as do elaborately evolved systems of institutional grammaticality such as culture and disciplinary forms of literacy, a venerable insight into the ineluctability of entropy and free radicals well before the second law of thermodynamics burst our bubble of systemic equanimity. Predicated on the alphabet, on letters literally, literacy's *nomos* harbors the antinomian instability of its grammatic characters and the mercurial aleatoriness of their combinatory possibilities. As a result, literacy's letter of the law is as precarious as any law based on letters, especially so when literacy's laws become graphic and literally figured. The written and the figurative

converge then into a functional synonymy, just as the literary and the representational coalesce as matrix of culture and crucible of literacy. Taming the figurative and shaming the graphic into decorum and propriety is the perpetual task of literacy and its relentless schooling.

Call the outcome a canon and the precepts of that canonical law call the preceptor's blooming rage. And dub the crucible of literacy's representational zeal the utopian object of the rebarbative and semi-articulate search for the location of culture in which the semi-literate find their paltry homing. In either case, whether in the jeremiad of the canon's plaintive prophet or in the hustling farrago of latest fashion's loose cannon, writing wreaks its havoc. First the raging Jeremiah, then the outrageous epigone suing for entry and accommodation.

"The West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own" (29). So writes Harold Bloom in his elegiac threnody titled *The Western Canon* and provocatively subtitled *The Books and School of the Ages*. Bloom continues:

Scholars who urge us to find the source of our morality and politics in Plato, or in Isaiah, are out of touch with the social reality in which we live. If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all. The reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves. The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or a more harmful citizen. (29-30)

Bloom's conclusion, terrific as it may be, has ample corroboration, witness, most recently in our baleful century of ideological orthodoxies and fundamentalist readings, the philologists and poets of Bosnia and Belgrade, witness the microbosnias of our own academy and firmly institutionalized professional darwinism.

Enter Homi Bhabha with a pastiche cartography, an "X" marking the crossroads as the location of culture just where the map folds. From that interstice he avers,

if we are seeking a "worlding" of literature, then perhaps it lies in a critical act that attempts to grasp the sleight of hand with which literature conjures with historical specificity, using the medium of psychic uncertainty, aesthetic distancing, or the obscure signs of the spirit-world, the sublime and the subliminal. As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation. (12)

"To live in the unhomely world," Bhabha perorates with yet another

appropriation, this one from Toni Morrison, "to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity: 'I am looking for the join ... I want to join ... I want to join'" (18).

Amidst Bloom's preferred literacy as soliloquy and reading for self-endurance, on the one hand, and Bhabha's "beyond-control" clamoring for accommodation and social solidarity in the face of literature's "sleight of hand," on the other, writing implacably continues to bedevil the protocols of representation and to waylay the representations made on behalf of one or another form of literacy. Ex-cathedra declamations and patois evangelism notwithstanding, writing persists as indomitable quotient that subverts any preferred form of literacy and its programmatic schooling. No edict of schoolmaster or church warden, whatever the handbook and whichever the doxology, has succeeded for long or very thoroughly in thwarting the unspoken and often invisible determinants that shape literacy; nor has it succeeded in domesticating writing's unpredictable turns that literacy would tame.

The conditions that enable the practices of literacy in the context of what Stanley Fish called, nearly two decades ago, "interpretive communities" exert their determinacies as surely and as stealthily as writing subverts our best intentions and our most cherished values. Stanley Fish's assurances, or forewarnings, that the greatest danger in exercising a particular kind of literacy in reading is not the possibility of failure, but the inevitability of our success have proved less than unimpeachable, as have his injunctions to do things naturally. We have since come to realize that what we deem natural is far from being so, except in the incorrigibly naturalizing reverie of our illusions. And we have come to realize too that the surest inevitability is the unpredictable nature of our encounter with writing, just as we have come to appreciate the inscrutability of the givens that control our modes of literacy. By way of demonstration, I invoke the improbable duo of Harold Bloom and Homi Bhabha, two drastically divergent poles in our current modes of literacy and critical reading. I do so because of the common fate their writing labors endure, despite the profound differences which divide them as readers and as literate sensibilities. I hope they will forgive the audacity of this conjugation. The juxtaposition is not meant to insult either of them.

Emerson can be accused of many things, except irony, noted Harold Bloom at one point. As is so often the case with those who are possessed of the gift of "aesthetic power," as he calls it, Bloom's remark on Emerson is like an echo from a mirror. It is the fate of strong readers, and certainly Bloom has to be the paragon of the species, to overlook self-irony. If this is so for Bloom, who has been strong enough to have been accused of many things but rarely, if ever, and certainly never justifiably, of irony, it certainly would be so for straining pretenders in the throes of over reaching. And yet, it is the perverse penchant of irony to insinuate itself where its host and target would be least hospitable to its

visitation.

And so it is that in the brief citation I have just read to you from Bloom's *The Western Canon*, the Sage of New Haven, who confesses with characteristic and admirable candor that, "[t]he reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves," blithely endures as well the spurning impudence of unceremonious irony. And I point this up not, as the Maestro would say, in my Oedipal clinamen as ephebe who was initiated into the perplexities of the visionary company in Bloom's own classroom at the impressionable age of a Yale undergraduate some time ago. Rather, I make the observation by way of illustrating how invisible, how implacably pervasive and controlling, the exertions of literacy are, to the point of getting the better of even the most literate and most incisive practitioners of our literacy, or doing so precisely because of the fearful magnitude of his literacy.

"The West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own." I re-cite our earlier citation from Bloom. The observation is characteristically keen and, likewise, categorical. Describing as it does a tradition of writers on whom Bloom predicates the paradigms and precepts of a canon, it follows that the canonical law expostulated on those grounds carries within it its own self-subversion. The *nomos* of this literacy's canon is inherently, and inexorably, antinomian, as I already suggested.

Even as he would persuasively advocate a set of values for a particular tradition of literacy, values which he renders universal, Bloom avers, "if we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation." And to drive home the point, conscious and unintended at once, Bloom pronounces his unappealable judgment: "To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all. The reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves." Though perhaps not as large as Walt Whitman's multitudes, Bloom's scale is grand. And so it is that he sentences "aesthetic power" to solipsism, severing as he would reading from any and all ideology, including, of course, the ideology of reading and the determinant ideological givens of literacy. He would sunder, in the process, all links between a Canon founded on Plato, Dante, Milton, Tolstoy, and Freud, among other masters of ideology, and "social, political, or personal moral values."

Bloom is not a comedian, and he certainly would eschew melodrama. The legacy of Northrop Frye taught us many seasons ago that the genres of comedy and melodrama require the wild card of irony. Bloom's is a season of tragedy and he the exemplary embodiment of the figure of agon he so eloquently portrays in his consummate and inconsolable literacy. The most poignant peripety in this agonistic eloquence is the unintended demonstration of just how subversive and self-subversive the masters and masterworks of our literacy are.

In this ironic reversal, "aesthetic power," which I take to be one of the strongest enablements of our literacy, illustrates just how ideologically determined and determinative it is. Within our critical literacy, it would be difficult to muster a more visionary insight than Bloom's. It would be commensurately difficult to match such insightful blindness.

To transit from Bloom to Bhabha is to pass from the sublime to something altogether different, but not so incongruous when it comes to the ironic subversions wrought by literacy on its practitioners. Whether ideology be spurned, as it is by Bloom, or whether it would be consciously held and problematically examined, as in Bhabha, the subterfuge of ideological entailments refuses to give quarter or grant immunity.

The opening gambit of Bhabha's edited volume *Nation and Narration* reads: "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (1). I believe Bhabha's sentence should be amended to read: "Nations, like narratives, find their origins in the myths of time and blur their horizons in the mind's eye." The amendment is necessary because the rest of Bhabha's introduction, subtitled "Narrating the Nation," and his concluding and oft-cited essay "DissemiNation" elide the significance and recalcitrant exertions of determinative literacies — be they mystified, illusory, ideologically unregenerate, pre-critical, theoretically unreconstructed. That elision is inversely commensurate to the primacy granted to the theorizing subject and writing agency. The correctives and strategic palinodes of Bhabha's latest book, *The Location of Culture*, exacerbate and magnify the blind side of what would otherwise be an insightful critical discourse, a theoretically hyperconscious narrative which, nevertheless, makes one wish on occasion that T.S. Eliot's venturesome raid on the inarticulate had had a more enduring legacy.

For the sake of economy and in a spirit of mercy toward your kind indulgence, I shall endeavor to be synoptic, taking as fitting example the fabled rhyme of "The Three Wise Men of Gotham." The point is not to expatiate upon and make Bhabha comprehensible, a difficult task at best. My aim, rather, is to suggest how even the more self-conscious strategists of our theoretical discourses endure the critical ambush of our literacies. What Bhabha's earlier volume, in the essay "DissemiNation" particularly, aims to remark is, in nuce, what he terms, and pardon the staccato of the sentence structure, I am simply quoting, "the mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy" (292). My conservative amendment of his introduction's opening sentence would have us not just remarking the nation as narrative strategy but questioning as well the strategic and tactical narratives of the nation where any mark of ambivalence is erased, not just bracketed, where nation is not just a narrative strategy but an empirical synecdoche for uncompromising claims pressed, whether surreptitiously or with brute force, as primordial, authoritative, and unnegotiable. While the grounds of such claims may be illusory and mythological, they are no less real, and certainly

no less repercussive, as we witness in Yugoslavia, Israel, Iran, China, and M. Le Pen's France. Such claims are narratively and strategically analogous to a critical/theoretical discourse that is blind to its own ambivalence and chiasmic possibilities. In an era of rabid nationalisms, we certainly are far from a postnational epoch, as Donald E. Pease, a panegyrist of Bhabha in a just-published article — "National Narratives, Postnational Narration" — dedicated to him would claim, despite empirical evidence to the contrary.

Thus, in "the worlding of literature" that is so crucial to Bhabha and to which I have already referred in citing from the introduction to his *The Location of Culture*, the genitive "of" proves to be unidirectional rather than ambivalent or double, at least the ambiguity and ambivalence are not simultaneously held or even beheld at all. In the particular instance of our earlier citation, for example, the focus falls exclusively on worlding by literature. The worlding of literature by the world goes by the wayside and along with it any sustained consideration of the cultural enablements and literacy's recalcitrant conditions that engender the worlding of our theoretical discourse on worlding itself.

Rather sanguine about the determinacies exerted by authoritative literacies and authoritarian cultures, Bhabha is commensurately confident about the capacity of our theoretical discourse to amend, translate, displace, and hybridize definitional lines, that is, narrative margins of representation. He predicates this confidence on what he sees as an insufficiency in the cultural context or system of meaning (36), an insufficiency which his own discourse fails to recognize in itself as product of its own cultural context and system of meaning, which we have been referring to by the shorthand term of literacy. I see this as yet another instance of literacy's occlusion of its unspoken determinacies and unequivocal enablements: A thwarting of critical consciousness at a critical point that leads even those who would historicize the specificity of their subject matter to neglect historicizing their own agency as subject.

To pinpoint the location of culture in cultural dislocations could disarm one's cautionary alertness to entailments that are not movable, or whose mobility is purely opportunistic and reinforcing of homogeneous and hegemonic structures that will not countenance or brook dislocation or heterogeneity. And to theorize and narrate them in that vein, does not necessarily translate them into the figures of one's representation. The scourge of incommensurability between academic discourse and the empirical world, and between one's textual culture and the pragmatic entailments of political culture, inexorably makes itself felt. The irony of such a fate in a theoretician who claims to be grounded on the historicity and materiality of his discursive position is egregious indeed. No less ironic in this regard is the very location from which Bhabha's own discursive position emanates, namely, Milton Friedman's University of Chicago, from where people's daily lives and capital — cultural, political, and economic — are assayed and commodified as the fungible currency of predatory free-marketsteering

in a global economy of multinationalism. In this regard, Bhabha's accommodationist sanguinity and belated privileging of what he terms "negotiation" in the first-chapter, self-theorizing apologia of his *Location of Culture* jangle with a peculiar resonance indeed.

At the end of the day, the *docta ignorantia* in Salinger's self-ironic "I'm quite illiterate, but I read a lot" may be our sole instrument of self-salvaging from the defining circumscriptions and self-reinforcing determinations of our literacies. The manifest convictions that accompany our repertorial mastery in literacy's script may well be as blinding as our less apparent enablements are binding, a recognition not altogether independent of that repertory itself. And if knowing better be a last resort, it would appear, alas, that we never could know better enough.

University of Oklahoma

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