CHAPTER 10

Reading, Writing, and the Wrath of My Father

JONATHAN G. SILIN

I have been thinking a lot about reading and writing these days. My own little back-to-basics movement has been prompted by two seemingly discrete events.

First, as codirector of research for a large urban school reform project, I have spent a good deal of time observing early childhood classrooms in a hard-pressed, low-performing district (Silin and Lippman, 2003). The pernicious insistence on measurable standards, high-stakes tests, and accountability has filtered down to even the youngest children and their teachers. In these classrooms every activity must contribute directly and visibly to teaching academic skills. The morning message, once written by teacher to students at the start of the day as a vehicle for encouraging discussion of past experiences or upcoming events, is now a formulaic exercise designed to teach letter and word recognition. When children are invited to bring in a favorite stuffed animal, the activity is rationalized with a measuring assignment during work time. The kindergartners must determine the tallest and shortest creatures brought from home. While reading storybooks, teachers emphasize the names of authors and illustrators, ask children to draw inferences from pictures, and direct attention to techniques of character and plot development. Seldom is a text left unanalyzed, and rarely are the author's words allowed to wash over the children,

the meaning and structure seeping into their pores without articulation. There is little time for cooking and block building, for trips into the neighborhood, and visits from people who do interesting work. In these, as in so many classrooms around the country, literacy takes precedence over life.

Across the Hudson River, in New York City, in the hospital rooms and nursing homes where my nonagenarian father has spent much of the last three years, I am also prompted to reflect on the power and limitations of the written word. Here the throat cancer that my father had been battling for so long has finally cost him the last portion of his larynx. Too debilitated or simply too stubborn to master the electrolarynx, an appliance that allows many to communicate despite the lack of vocal cords, my father is wedded to the written word. Steadfastly refusing a simple instruction such as "milk" or "sweater," he turns every request into a paragraph-long treatise on his current health status or the climate conditions in his room. He takes obvious satisfaction in his carefully crafted sentences, which range in mood from playful and humorous to angry and demanding. When he finally hands me the yellow legal pad on which he scrawls his communications, his expression is one of pride and watchfulness. Will I laugh at the right place, grasp his double entendre, or appreciate his concerns? Although I often wish for the more rapid, more "natural" dialogue possible with the electrolarynx, I cannot help but be awed by his command of written language. Despite his numerous disabilities, he is still able to generate ideas, exercise control, and make himself known with paper and pen. My father teaches me about the compensatory pleasures of the text.

At first blush, the days in classrooms and the evenings with my father would appear to have little in common. Together, however, these experiences make me appreciate the potential of written language for sustaining life and producing social worlds as well as the difficulties of nurturing such an appreciation in the contemporary world. Both experiences send me back to childhood, to wonder about my own early struggles with reading and writing. These "re-searches" into the past lead me to argue that learning often involves unspoken forms of loss as well as the acquisition of new skills and ideas. Effective teaching, teaching that honors student imagination, seeks authentic engagement, and creates spaces for difficult emotions, works through hinting and pointing rather than naming and telling. Literacy, and by extension the curriculum as text, becomes pleasurable when it exceeds social utility, leaves behind the familiar and the well rehearsed, and moves into uncharted territories where loss, discomfort, playfulness—even sexuality—can be fully expressed

A caveat is in order. Although in this chapter I address my history of reading and writing, I am not a literacy scholar but have been an early

childhood teacher, teacher educator, and researcher for more than thirty years with a history of autobiographical contributions to the larger field of curriculum theory (Silin, 1995, 1997, 1999b, 2000). As such, I have struggled with realizing the promise of what Clifford Geertz (1983) referred to so long ago as "blurred genres." Beyond the seduction of the well-told tale, autobiographical research has the potential for moving our thinking past the traditional polarities of theory and practice, teacher and student, and reader and writer (Marshall, 1992; Miller, 1991; Pinar, 1994). Most recently, writing personal and professional narratives together has taught me the complicated ways in which I use my early childhood skills in caring for my parents—the importance of routines, transitions, relationship building—and they in turn have prompted me to rethink the early years of life, including the learning of language and literacy (Silin, 1998, 1999a)

Curriculum as Compensatory Text

I was what has euphemistically been called a late bloomer, although not as late as my older brother who did not begin to read until seventh grade. My emergence as an independent reader was slow and difficult. One incident stands out. I am seated at a table pretending to read a book that my second-grade teacher had enthusiastically given me a few days earlier. It is illustrated with gaudy pastel colors and has the toxic smell of fresh ink. The story involves some popular cartoon characters of the day in which I have absolutely no interest. Not even the active commerce in comics among my brother's friends—and I do eye their collections with envy—has seduced me into reading about imaginary animals or people. My own overactive fantasy life, crowded with figures from the real world, has no space for these intruders created by the pens of Walt Disney and the like. I turn the pages every few minutes hoping to appear gainfully employed.

My teacher, a tall, thin woman in her twenties, circulates through the room that contains a handful of students. She is a new, well-meaning teacher, as my mother explains to me on several occasions trying to secure my fuller cooperation in the teacher's attempts to teach me to read. But good intentions aren't enough to win my confidence or that of the small band of defiant second graders with whom I hang out. We never miss an opportunity to take advantage of her inexperience.

Now the teacher leans over me with her prominent nose, receding chin, and black-framed eyeglasses, and asks me to read aloud. I stumble over every word with more than three letters and cannot answer the questions that she poses about the story. This encounter, in which the novice teacher who cannot control the class meets the reluctant reader unable to decipher the words on the page, is indelibly etched in my mind. It is a painful

moment of truth in which my ignorance is unmasked and her authority is established. It is a moment that I carry with me as I visit classrooms today and imagine myself a "classified" child, one whose name is posted at the entrance to the classroom and who requires an individual education plan to be filed with the vice-principal.

I do not know what kind of training my teachers received during the 1940s and 1950s, or to what degree the best intentions of teachers I currently observe are constrained by the extensive testing and assessment they must conduct (Schwartz and Silin, 2004; Silin and Schwartz, 2003). I do know that a new consensus has emerged regarding the place of literacy learning in the early childhood curriculum (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). This consensus focuses on the "big picture," on the child's understandings concerning the functions and uses of literacy in the contemporary world (Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1991; Vukelich, 1994). While staff development efforts and research and accreditation assessments may not always have kept pace with this changed view of literacy as a set of social practices rather than just a set of specific skills, it is certainly one that might have served me well as a child (Dickinson, 2002; Ure & Raban, 2001).

Looking back, however, it is Madeleine Grumet (1990) who has helped me to make sense of my early ambivalence toward the written word. Drawing on Lacan (1968) and Kristeva (1980), she described the innocuous utterances of adults at play with young children as the first use of language to bridge the physical distance between self and other. Talking all the while, the loving caregiver holds the infant high in the air or hides his or her face in the game of peek-a-boo. The adult voice offers a sense of safety and continuity. "I am still here even though you cannot feel or see me." The sounds sustain connection. They create what Grumet calls a "mediating space," a place in which we try to reconnect to the people from whom we have been separated, the things that we have lost, and later, the person we once were. As language develops and written texts play an increasingly larger role in our lives, they too become a mediating space. Here, Grumet suggested, Lacan and Kristeva part company. Lacan emphasized the abject, that which we have rejected or given up on the way to becoming independent, and he had a more pessimistic view of our potential for recuperating our losses. In contrast, Kristeva, with her emphasis on the semiotic aspects of language—expressive, playful, aesthetic—posited a more optimistic outcome. For Kristeva, language is something other than a kit bag of symbolic substitution. It resonates with first relationships and early emotions.

Grumet's originality lies in the way that she described the curriculum at large as a mediating space. She transformed psychological descriptions about how language spans the distance between individual infant and caregiver into epistemological insights for curriculum making. She understood the curriculum as a place in which the intentions of the teacher and student meet, a place in which the initial dyadic relationship of caregiver and child opens out to the world. Teacher and student come to know each other as they explore a reality outside of themselves—the local community or perhaps a far away place and time, a storybook or science experiment. Like an engaging text, the effective curriculum invites us to explore the boundaries and exclusions we have accommodated on the way to constructing our social identities.

Reading can likewise become an act of recuperation, a place in which to find satisfying substitutions for the inevitable losses endured as a part of growing. Like a disconsolate infant who does not accept the warmth of a favorite blanket or touch of a rag doll when a caregiver has departed, I resisted the compensatory pleasures offered by the text. For the longest time the word and the world remained equally mysterious and foreboding.

Learning and Loss

Miraculously I had acquired a few essential reading skills by fifth grade even though I seldom had the desire to open a book. My lack of engagement with reading was now revealed during our Thursday morning trips to the school library. I am always anxious and at loose ends during these sessions. A short, gray-haired woman, with a quick temper, bad teeth, and smoker's breath, the librarian is the butt of many a ten-year-old's jokes. Each week she impatiently questions me about my interests to hasten the selection of a book. But I have no ability to name my interests and therefore assume that I have none. How can you not have any interests, she demands incredulously. A person of no interests, an uninteresting person, I am mortified by this inquisition. Never doing well under pressure, I settle on a Hardy Boys mystery, consciously attracted by the cover drawing of two friends and unconsciously drawn by the promise of scenes depicting illicit intimacy between them. Will they have a sleepover and be forced to share the same bed? Will they unexpectedly end up at the town swimming hole without their bathing suits? When a quick scouting foray into the text yields none of the desired moments, I disappointedly check it out anyway. During the week I read so slowly and unenthusiastically that I cannot remember the plot, let alone finish the book.

Here I acknowledge my envy of the ten-year-old girls who were my classmates. Although whenever possible we divided ourselves strictly by gender, I often caught glimpses of "the girls" rapturously engaged in reading about a plethora of horses and horse farms, nurses and hospitals,

families and family discord. I could not imagine that girls had reading problems. But was all this textual interest simply an innocent exploration of imaginary people and places or an indication of some unfathomable interior life? Was my own textual hesitance a fear of what I might find or not find in the larger world?

At age ten I would not have labeled my curiosity about other boys as "homosexual curiosity." Research confirms that some gay men experience a strong sense of difference from a very early age (Cantwell, 1996) and there is acknowledgment now of a far greater diversity of genders and sexual orientations than in the 1950s. The seven-year-old hero of the highly acclaimed film, *Ma Vie en Rose*, for example, understands himself to be a hybrid gender, a boy who will eventually become the girl he was always intended to be. Ludovic has no shame, no doubts, about the situation in which he finds himself. His researches into the distribution of X and Y chromosomes lead him to tell Jerome, the boy he anticipates marrying when he is not a boy, "I'm a girlboy. My X for the girl fell into the trash. It was a scientific mistake" (Britzman, 2001, p. 12). He must only wait for the return of his wayward chromosome to fulfill his destiny. Still my disappointment in the Hardy Boys mystery speaks in part to the gap between the official curriculum and the unofficial interests that powered my curiosity. I was not yet a proficient or committed enough reader to lend the book my life or to impose my own imagination on the text. That was a trick I discovered in adolescence, at the same time as I was more accurately able to name my desires. Only then did I seem to engage in the transformative processes that would protect and nurture the pleasures, sexual and otherwise, that I sought. While I do not take literally Northrop Frye's (1947) assertion that imagination creates reality, it does seem to me that often the world we desire is far more real to us than the world in which we actually live.

Following on Frye and Freud, Adam Phillips (1999) suggested that, at heart, children's curiosity is sexual curiosity, children's theorizing is sexual theorizing. Curiosity is itself a form of appetite that children continuously seek to satisfy through fantasy, story, and the creation of coherent fictions. Curiosity might also be viewed as a response to a sense of insufficiency, a desire for wholeness. From a cognitive point of view, Piaget (1952, 1968) suggested that children are curious when they become aware of a disparity between what they apprehend and their ability to make sense of it. We are driven to seek equilibrium, or wholeness, when our theories of how the world works are no longer consistent with our observations.

Beyond feeling autobiographically right, Phillips's discussion of curiosity is redolent with pedagogical implications. No matter the motivation, curiosity—the wish that things were otherwise—is to acknowledge a sense

of loss. Wanting the world to be different is a sign of life. The more we give up—the coherent self, the omniscient parent, the caregiver's solace—the more sophisticated our representational strategies become. The development of language, and by extension reading and writing, is a central part of this progressive, linear story in which we are ever more civilized, skilled at managing the processes of substitution through which our "natural" instincts are managed. Those who are more comfortable with a social or political rather than psychological reading of what is given up or lost in schools need only turn to the literature on the experience of marginalized populations in classrooms (Delpit, 1995; McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993; Rodriquez, 1982).

While analysts such as Lacan, Winnicott, and Klein emphasize the child's helplessness and loss, Freud was more impressed by the child's resilience and imaginative plenitude. Similarly, Phillips argued that parents and educators need to honor the satisfactions of the unarticulated experience. Not a romantic eschewing the accomplishment of language, Phillips wanted to clear a space in which children and adults can move back and forth, a space that recognizes the value of linguistic incompetence as well as fluency, verbal insufficiency as well as communicative competence. For some, the rush to literacy, to fill the void with words and texts, reflects fears of a time when emotions were less modulated, bodily functions less well controlled, and desires less well socialized. Then, language represents the only way forward, and unarticulated experience is consigned to the past.

I don't know if my own reluctance to read was part of a strategy to remain in the past and therefore closer to preverbal ways of being in the world. I do know that as a teacher of young children I did not think that learning might involve loss. Or more accurately, I accepted that whatever the child left behind was of lesser value (that is, efficacy in responding to the world) and therefore of little interest. Steeped in stage theories of development, I believed that the acquisition of new skills and knowledge was to be placed only in the profit column. Along with parents I celebrated familiar milestones—a child learns to button her coat, tie her shoelaces, or walk home from school on her own. I did not imagine that in learning a new way of being in the world, a child might also give up an old way, one that had worked for him in the past—the physical intimacy that occurs when an adult cares for his clothing or the social connection he experiences when accompanied by a caregiver on the walk home from school.

In her insightful commentary on Freudian pedagogy, Deborah Britzman (1998) suggests that it is the ability to tolerate ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty that teachers should seek to foster in their students rather than false notions of truth, knowledge, and linear paths to learning. I read

Britzman to mean that along with the more commonly accepted emotions of mastery and control, learning may also involve disorientation and dislocation. Indeed, both Phillips (1999) and Barthes (1975) argued that discomfort and conflict, along with the ability to lose oneself, are integral to the deepest human pleasures. Even so, students may defend against a loss and the sense of being lost. In response, teachers need to embrace resistance and the conflict it causes inside of students and with others. When learning itself is recorded in a profit and loss register, it can help us to understand student resistance to our best pedagogical efforts.

Suspended Performances

By the time I enter high school, the terrain of interpersonal struggle has shifted from reading to writing. My grammar and syntax are awkward, my paragraphs filled with non-sequiturs, and my spelling unrecognizable. Nightly responsibility for editing my homework alternates between my mother and my father, the former far more patient and the latter always insistent that I understand the principles underlying his corrections. I am impatient, easily frustrated, and unwilling to internalize the lessons they struggle to teach me. In the end, I am never quite sure who is the real author of these anguished collaborations. They reflect my deep ambivalence about being held accountable for my own words, my own life.

This reluctance to claim my ideas on paper, I now believe, was connected in some complicated and still incomprehensible way to my recalcitrant and unacceptable sexuality. The written word was both the medium that tied me to my parents in endless battles over periods, commas, and paragraphs and the medium that eventually allowed me to see myself as an independent agent with a unique story to tell.

Initially seeking confirmation of my burgeoning homosexuality in the words of others, I considered the pseudoscientific tomes of Edmund Bergler and Alfred Kinsey. But their case studies of tortured unhappy lives had nothing to do with the desires that coursed through my body. I was forced to create far more arresting representations to guide my future. Electrified by the touch of Marc's hand on my shoulder as we walked home from the museum, unnerved by Roger's invitation for a sleepover date that New Year's eve, mesmerized by the folds in Donald's electric blue bathing suit—I began to authorize my own life.

These brief, furtively written narratives transformed vague longings into particular moments, and previously unthought ideas spilled onto the page. Tortured, aroused, sometimes lost and sometimes getting it right, I was having a good time. I acknowledge that when Roland Barthes (1975) described the pleasures of the text, he does not limit himself to such

concretely sexual scenes. Yet, for him as for me, the body is always present at the scene of pleasure. The most common pleasure is experienced when the reader encounters that which is comfortable, recognizable, and affirming in the text. The less frequent, more intense sort of pleasure is experienced when the reader meets that which prompts discomfort, a loss of self, or *jouissance* (bliss). For Barthes, bliss was not necessarily associated with the recounting of specific pleasures. It is not the erotic scene itself but its anticipation, not the actual moment of fulfillment but the preceding moments that the reader seeks to sustain. With limited life experience and literary skills, I certainly did not understand, as Barthes explained, that pleasure works through the figurative as well as the representational. Nor did I realize that the writer can point to pleasure, but attempts to name or define it always fall short of experience. Nonetheless, in adolescence writing had suddenly become a source of pleasure, a place of affirmation and "imaginative plenitude" in which the body took primacy.

Exhilarated by my discovery, naïve enough to want to take my newfound pleasure public and sophisticated enough to know that narrative scraps would need to be transformed into a more formal literary statement, I authored a homoerotic short story deeply indebted to my first reading of James Baldwin. Undertaken as a senior English project, this personal declaration of independence, no parental editing required, was ultimately returned by the teacher without a correction, without a comment of any kind.

How did I understand this resounding silence? Confused. Disappointed. Forewarned. While the lack of response hardly short-circuited my desires, it certainly made clear the gulf between my personal researches and the academic world. I had taken what felt like a huge risk only to find that my paper and I had fallen into an abyss.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) says that teaching takes place on what Peggy Phelan (1993) describes as the "rackety bridge between self and other" (p. 174). Ellsworth emphasizes the impossibility of knowing another, our inability to ford the abyss that opens out between people. The best we can do, she argues, is stand beside one another on that rackety bridge and get curious about the "suspended performances each of us might make so that each of our passions for learning might be entertained here" (p. 159).

In retrospect, it seems clear that my English teacher was unwilling to step onto that rackety bridge, let alone stand by me as we peered into the unknown. At the same time, and very much to her credit, she neither referred me to counseling nor suggested that she knew some superior truth about sexuality. In this I am lucky, for, as Ellsworth suggested, traditional teachers understand their function as representational, to present the truth

of their subject matter. In contrast, Ellsworth posited teaching as a performative act, at its best serving a catalytic function that incites students to construct their own meanings. Pedagogy is unpredictable, incomplete, and immeasurable in its impact. Like Phillips, Ellsworth valued the life of the body and emotions that are so often papered over with words. She celebrated our potential for becoming lost in the text, absorbed in ideas, not knowing who we are or where we are going.

Ellsworth's respect for the absolute otherness that separates student and teacher is at the core of her work. While her analysis leads to insightful criticisms of traditional pedagogy, it offers cold comfort to the teacher who faces students every day. In contrast, Grumet (1988) posited the text and curriculum as a place in which student and teacher can learn about, if not understand, each other. Rather than enter the bleakness of an abyss (Is it before us or between us? I am never quite sure), we can, together with our students, turn toward the world. Grumet insists that it is the teacher's responsibility to point to the world that matters to her. This pointing, this invitation to explore, is a critical form of valuing. It leads us out of the pedagogical cul-de-sac created by Ellsworth's search for an authentic student–teacher relationship and into a potentially rich curriculum.

Drawing on very different sources from those of Grumet, Eve Sedgwick (2003) reaches a similar conclusion about the value of pointing and hinting over naming and telling. Sedgwick is attracted to the undecided, uncertain ambiguity of Buddhist pedagogy. Like Ellsworth and Phillips, she honored the unarticulated, preverbal life that flows just beneath the surface of our daily activities. Like Grumet too, Sedgwick recognized that the central role of the teacher is to point to part of the world, identifying a problem or experience worthy of the student's attention. She was less sanguine, however, about the process entailed in such pointing or confident that we know what we are actually pointing at. That is the space which unfolds between language and experience, the object and its signifier, the means and the ends.

Learning takes place as students comply with teachers' instructions. There are skills to be acquired, facts to be memorized, and habits of mind to be assimilated. Learning also takes place at a deeper level as students transform the teachers' lessons into personally meaningful ideas. Teachers cannot predict what will be significant to students. They can provide ample opportunities for the transformative work through which students make knowledge their own, including the time and materials required for the imaginative representation and reconstruction of experience (Greene, 1995). Literacy instruction should preserve and nurture pleasure, the idiosyncratic interests that feed curiosity, that keep us wanting to learn. All

education involves socialization and sublimation. Successful education finds a balance where official and unofficial curricula each have a place and where public languages are acquired in such a way that they do not subsume private lives.

Writing Private Lives into the Public Record

As I became a writer, I also became a reader. In his short but memorable essay "On Reading," Proust (1971) described the places and days in which he first became absorbed by books. What remains most vivid about childhood reading, he claimed, is not the text itself but the call to an early lunch when the chapter is not quite finished, the summer outing during which our only desire is to return to the book left hastily aside on the dining room table, or the secret pleasure of reading in bed long after all the adults have gone to sleep. While particular phrases titillate our curiosity and provoke our desire, Proust assured us that there is no truth to be found in words themselves, just the keys that help us to unlock interior rooms of our own design. Only in adolescence did the solitude required of the engaged reader become tolerable, dare I say attractive, to me. And only then was I able to set aside my own immediate interests to lend the book my larger life.

Although I favored long family narratives and bildungsromans with lots of character development and psychological complications, my tastes were eclectic. I was especially given to perusing my parent's bookshelves, which contained everything from Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, forbidden to my best friend by his more protective parents, to Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Now, on the very same shelves, wedged in between books on Jewish history and biographies of Zionist leaders (my father's) and piled haphazardly atop an assortment of art books (my mother's) are the volumes containing my own essays on education. I have never become used to seeing them mixed in with the volumes of my childhood; they seem oddly out of context, misplaced fragments from the academic world. And what do these carefully proffered "gifts" mean to my parents anyway?

They are proud of my scholarly achievements, clearly unimagined when I announced my intention of working with young children thirty-five years ago. Of course, the books on early childhood find a more prominent place on their coffee table than those on queer theory. So not long ago I was surprised to learn how eager my father was to send a journal article on the impact of HIV/AIDS on the gay community to my cousin's lesbian daughter. Needless to say, he didn't read it himself, but the mere fact that he would traffic in once-contraband matter is an indication of how far he had come