LITERACIES AND "TRADITIONS"

Most public discussion of literacy treats "literacy" as a mass term, and is concerned with "how much" of it people have (like money or virtue). However, I believe this view of literacy is largely incoherent. To see this, consider that literacy surely means nothing unless it has something to do with the ability to read. "Read" is a transitive verb. So literacy must have something to do with being able to read *something*. And this *something* will *always* be a text of a certain *type*. Different types of texts (e.g., newspapers, comic books, law books, physics texts, math books, novels, poems, advertisements) call for different types of background knowledge and require different skills to be read meaningfully.

To go one step further: obviously no one can read a given text if he or she does not know what the text means. But there are many different levels of meaning one can give to or take from any text. And this point does not just apply to "fancy" texts, like poems, novels, legal briefs, political tracts, and religious texts. Consider, to take a relatively trivial example, the warning on a bottle of Tylenol:

> WARNING: Keep this and all medication out of the reach of children. As with any drug, if you are pregnant or nursing a baby, seek the advice of a health professional before using this product. In the case of accidental overdosage, contact a physician or poison control center immediately.

This text gives rise to a whole host of questions: Why is the Tylenol company telling us about other medicines ("all medication," "as with any drug"), not just their own? Why, if I am pregnant, should I seek the advice of a "health professional," but, if I have taken an overdose, a "physician"? What do I do if my overdose wasn't "accidental," and why does the warning refer to "accidental overdosage" not just simply to "overdosage"? If (as the bottle says elsewhere) 8 pills in 24 hours is the maximum dosage, does "immediately" in the last line mean I should rush down to poison control if I have had 10 pills in 24 hours? If this is a "warning," as it says it is, then why isn't it in more direct "warning" language (e.g., "This medicine could be dangerous to children, pregnant and nursing women, and to anyone if an overdose is taken")? Depending upon how you answer these questions, you will "read" the warning differently.

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Thus, whatever literacy has to do with reading, reading must be spelled out, at the very least, as multiple abilities to "read" texts of *certain types* in *certain ways* or to certain levels. There are obviously many abilities here, each of them a type of literacy, one of a set of literacies.

Now one does not learn to read texts of type X in way Y unless one has had experience in settings where texts of type X are read in way Y. These settings are various sorts of social institutions, like churches, banks, schools, government offices, or social groups with certain sorts of interests, like baseball cards, comic books, chess, politics, or what have you. One has to be socialized into a *practice* to learn to read texts of type X in way Y, a practice other people have already mastered. Since this is so, we can turn literacy on its head, so to speak, and refer crucially to the social institutions or social groups that have these practices, rather than to the practices themselves. When we do this, something odd happens: it turns out that the practices of such social groups are never just literacy practices. They also involve ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing, and believing. Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs. You can no more cut the literacy out of the overall social practice, or cut away the non-literacy parts from the literacy parts of the overall practice, than you can subtract the white squares from a chess board and still have a chess board.

A new literacy (= a way Y of reading/writing/speaking texts of type X) is not added as a discrete and separable skill to the rest of the cognitive, language, and interactional abilities one has. It is added to an already pre-existent cognitive, affective, linguistic, and interactional repertoire, a repertoire which is formed out of the primary socialization that each of us underwent at home and the later socializations we have had in various more public groups and institutions. T. S. Eliot (1932) said that every time a new literary text is added to the body ("tradition") of Western literature, it reorganizes and changes, in however minute a fashion, that whole body—changes the "tradition" in terms of which literary texts are written, read, and understood. Similarly, when one acquires a literacy, this reorganizes and changes the entire repertoire of one's language, cognitive, and interactional skills. And "vice-versa" to be sure: one's entire cognitive, linguistic, and interactional repertoire affects how a new literacy is acquired, stored, used, and integrated with other abilities and capacities. To give an example, consider below one of my personal readings of the Tylenol warning above:

> You basically middle-class people to whom this "warning" is primarily addressed (given the sort of language it is written in, and the assumptions about background knowledge in regard to the medical profession it makes) already know you shouldn't give adult medication to children, or take medication when pregnant or nursing without the advice of someone who knows more about the effects of medicine than you do, or take an overdosage. You already know in fact that drugs

> like aspirin are potent medicine that can do harm. But if you, through your own negligence, act stupidly and so against your knowledge (as we all do) don't blame us, we warned you. If you are not this sort of person, then you probably aren't reading or at least paying attention to this label, but don't let your lawyer say in court we didn't warn you (officially speaking). If you are unluckily sensitive to this drug and even a small amount harms you, we did say anything over 8 is technically speaking an overdosage, and so you were warned too. We certainly do not want you to hurt yourself, and we would like the world to be a nice mainstream sort of place: in fact, both these things favor selling more of this medicine, which is our primary interest.

However cynical you personally might find this reading (which I believe, by the way, entirely "accurate"), I assure you I interpret spoken language in this genre the same way. I am, in fact, capable of writing, or even speaking, such language when my own professional self-interest needs protecting in our complicated, hierarchical, pluralistic society. Furthermore, I can incorporate aspects of such skills into my other literacies to certain degrees, say when giving a lecture or interpreting a poem or writing an administrative memo. Going further, it is likely that my "skill" at reading the Tylenol bottle "infects" all of my thinking and interacting to some degree, greater or less for various settings. It is also likely that my reading of the Tylenol bottle is deeply affected by my other cognitive, language, and interactional skills.

Each of us is an amalgam of cognitive, affective, social, and linguistic skills, attitudes, and values, an amalgam formed from our different primary socializations in the home (which vary by ethnic, cultural, and social group) and the different mix of secondary socializations we have had in groups and institutions beyond the family. Each of us as an individual person can be viewed as a "tradition" in our own right, much like Eliot's "tradition" in literature. The tradition that each of us is changes each time it acquires a new ability and each new ability is shaped differently by each tradition. We individual traditions look more or less like other traditions, because our tradition was (and is continuously) formed by being socialized by other traditions (people) living in various social settings which require that each tradition, at least in certain regards, not get too disparate from the others.

Thus, instead of looking at a discrete ability of the sort one might see in a laboratory or find on a test, I want to look at three traditions. That is, I want to look at a real-world linguistic act and see how language, literacy, cognition, values, and interaction function as an integrated whole. My three traditions are all high school boys. One is a working-class black, one is a working-class white, and one is an upper-class white (whom I will refer to simply as "the upper-class student" to distinguish him from the other white student, whom I will refer to simply as "the white student"). I do not care overmuch about their social class here. What I care about is demonstrating how, though they are doing "the same thing," they represent something very much like three differ-

ent traditions. To bring out this point, I will give each of the traditions names: The black student I will say is a "social-empiricist," the white student a "rationalist-mentalist," and the upper-class student a "solipsist." Each student, as part of a group that shared his ethnic and social attributes, though not necessarily his gender, had read the story below:

THE ALLIGATOR RIVER STORY

Once upon a time there was a woman named Abigail who was in love with a man named Gregory. Gregory lived on the shore of a river. Abigail lived on the opposite shore of the river. The river which separated the two lovers was teeming with man-eating alligators. Abigail wanted to cross the river to be with Gregory. Unfortunately, the bridge had been washed out. So she went to ask Sinbad, a river boat captain, to take her across. He said he would be glad to if she would consent to go to bed with him preceding the voyage. She promptly refused and went to a friend named Ivan to explain her plight. Ivan did not want to be involved at all in the situation. Abigail felt her only alternative was to accept Sinbad's terms. Sinbad fulfilled his promise to Abigail and delivered her into the arms of Gregory.

When she told Gregory about her amorous escapade in order to cross the river, Gregory cast her aside with disdain. Heartsick and dejected, Abigail turned to Slug with her tale of woe. Slug, feeling compassion for Abigail, sought out Gregory and beat him brutally. Abigail was overjoyed at the sight of Gregory getting his due. As the sun sets on the horizon, we hear Abigail laughing at Gregory.

Small groups of high-school students had been asked to discuss the story (without the teacher being present) and to come to a consensus about how the characters should be ranked "from the most offensive to the least objectionable." At the end of the task, each group chose one student (the ones we are concerned with here) to give their group ranking and to say why they had ranked the characters as they did. Below I reprint the responses of the three students chosen to represent their three respective groups. Each of the responses is divided into its "speech paragraphs" or, as I will call them here, "stanzas."

THE BLACK STUDENT'S RESPONSE

STANZA 1
All right
As a group
we decided Sinbad was the worse
because he should have never in the first place ask her to go to bed with him
just to get her across the water
to see *her* loved one

STANZA 2
Then we had Gregory
because when she arrived over there

he just totally disowned her you know
like I don't want you after what you did
which is wrong

STANZA 3
We got Slug for third
True Abigail told him to beat him up
but he didn't have to
He could have said no
and he just you know brutally beat him up

STANZA 4
Abigail is third
because she laughed and said
(Interruption: That's four) Yeah I mean fourth Yeah
she's fourth
because she never should have told Slug to beat him up
and then laughed you know

STANZA 5
Ivan we have last
because he did the right thing by saying
I don't want to be involved in the situation
He could be a friend and still not want to be involved
It's none of his business

THE WHITE STUDENT'S RESPONSE

STANZA 1
OK our findings were
that um the most offensive spot was Sinbad
mainly because for no other reason he just wanted to sleep with Abby
You know for his own benefit
you know kind of cheap

STANZA 2
OK Coming in second was Gregory
mainly because he didn't really listen to a reason from her
and he kinda . . . kinda . . . tossed her aside you know without thinking
you know he might have done the same if he was put in the same position
you know
for love it was why she did it

STANZA 3
Then we put Abigail in the 3rd spot
only because we took a vote (Laughter)
No, because because we figured she didn't really do anything
She didn't I mean she didn't tell Slug to beat up Sinbad
She didn't tell Slug to beat up Gregory
so she really didn't have any bearing
She was just dejected, so

STANZA 4
Now Slug we figured was the fourth
because his only reason for beating up Gregory was through compassion
so he wasn't really that offensive

STANZA 5
And Ivan came in fifth
because Ivan didn't do anything
He he just kind of sat out of the way
so he offended no one

And that's that's our ranking.

THE UPPER-CLASS STUDENT'S RESPONSE

STANZA 1
Okay see we can all sort of like come around seeing other people's point of view
but Sinbad seemed to have like a pretty pure motive
like we couldn't see any real good in what Sinbad was doing
it just seemed a pretty purely lecherous and sleazy thing to do

STANZA 2
And then Gregory seemed second
I think just because he hit a nerve
in that here was this girl
that had you know who had done such a desperate thing for him
and he had turned [against her] with disdain
and so I think he was just ranked as an emotional reaction to the [unclear]

STANZA 4
And Slug
we didn't like Slug's name
and to beat someone up brutally
I mean we could sort of see Gregory's point of view
and we could sort of see Slug's point of view
but they could have done something better
something to make the situation a little bit [better]

STANZA 5
And Abigail you know
we weren't really comfortable with Abigail at all
but yeah well we could see this you know desperate attempt at love
you know we had sort of empathy with that
and you know in the end she's just embittered you know
I mean you can sort of understand her being embittered
yeah she had died for love that day

STANZA 6
So another thing you know Ivan was just not really involved
so Ivan you know we figured
maybe Ivan was perceptive enough
to realize that these people were all really [sleazy?]

I will discuss differences among these three responses in five areas: (1) use of pronouns; (2) how inferences are drawn; (3) the "moral lexicon" used; (4) construal of social relations; and (5) force or directness of the text.

Use of Pronouns

The black student, in his first stanza, uses the pronoun "her" to refer to Abigail, without having actually explicitly introduced her by name or through a description. This makes perfect sense, since he knows that the primary addressee (his teacher) has read the story and task instructions. Therefore, no one could fail to know who "her" refers to. In fact, the black student uses this strategy quite consistently throughout. He uses a pronoun for Abigail three times in the first stanza and twice in the second before mentioning her by name in the third stanza. He uses "over there" in stanza 2 for the riverbank, which is assumed to be mutually known but is not explicitly introduced. He uses "him" for Gregory twice in stanza 3 and once in stanza 4, even though Slug has replaced Gregory as the topic in stanza 4 (assuming that the listener knows from the story that it was Gregory who was beat up by Slug). In stanza 5, he quotes Ivan and says, "he could be a friend," assuming the listener can infer that Ivan is addressing his friend Abigail. All these devices signal that the speaker takes himself and the hearer (the teacher) to share certain knowledge (the story and the task), which they do in fact share.

The white student does not follow the same strategy. For example, in his first stanza, he uses the name "Abby" rather than a pronoun, and in his fourth stanza he overtly mentions that it was Gregory whom Slug beat up. The white student overtly states information that the hearer (the teacher) already knows and which he knows she knows. This may seem strange if one thinks about it, though of course it sounds normal to us who share this speaker's strategy for such tasks. The black and the white student are signaling different contexts. Or, put another way, they are construing the context differently. The black student is treating the teacher as someone who shares knowledge with him and who is part of the overall task. He is also signaling that he takes the text he is orally constructing to be a continuous and integral part of the whole task starting with the reading of the story and instructions, through the group discussion, and ending with his summary. The white student is signaling that the teacher somehow stands outside the task. She is taken to be listening not in her role as a person who in fact shares knowledge of the story and task, but in some other role, perhaps an evaluative one. He also signals that the oral text he is constructing is autonomous (sealed off) from the rest of the overall task and the interaction it involves, and thus a pronoun cannot refer back out of this oral text to the earlier stages of the task and interaction (any more than it can refer to knowledge that is lodged outside his oral text in the mind of the hearer).

The upper-class student uses pronouns much as the white student does, in the sense that he does not rely on mutual knowledge outside the oral text he is constructing to give reference to any pronouns. However, he does differ from the white student in a significant way: he not only overtly introduces each character by name, but in each case, save one, he repeats the name two or more times before he will use a pronoun. In fact, throughout the text he avoids pronouns as much as possible. In stanza 1, Sinbad is mentioned twice by name and never pronominalized. In stanza 3, Slug is mentioned three times by name and never pronominalized. In stanza 4, Abigail is mentioned twice by name before she is pronominalized. And in the fourth line of that stanza (stanza 4) the student says the group had empathy, not with "her" (Abigail), but with "that" (her desperate attempt at love). In the final stanza, Ivan is mentioned by name three times without ever being pronominalized. The upper-class student's failure to use pronouns creates distance between himself and the characters in the story. In this regard, the white student stands midway between the black student and the upper-class one.

How Inferences Are Drawn

The differences in how the three speakers do or do not leave information to be inferred by the hearer are matched by differences in how the speakers themselves draw inferences from the story text. The black speaker says in stanza 3 that Abigail "told him [Slug] to beat him [Gregory] up"; the white student in his stanza 3 says Abigail "didn't tell Slug to beat up Gregory." The story text says "Heartsick and dejected, Abigail turned to Slug with her tale of woe." Just as the black student is willing to see the oral text he is constructing as continuous with the earlier interaction, and to see the teacher as part of the social network involved in the task, so also he is willing to make inferences that go beyond and outside the written text. The white student, who treats his oral text as autonomous, sealed off from the earlier interaction and from the teacher's real knowledge, is unwilling also to go too far beyond the written story text, which he treats likewise as autonomous and sealed off.

The upper-class student avoids altogether mentioning whether he has inferred that Abigail did or did not tell Slug to beat up Gregory. This is because his focus is never on what the characters did or said, but on how they feel and how he feels about them. At a deeper level, as we will see below, characters in the story are never allowed to directly interact with each other in the upper-class student's stanzas. The characters are each treated as social isolates, sealed off and autonomous from each other. Thus, the question as to whether Abigail did or did not tell Slug to beat up Gregory cannot be "said" or dealt with in the language of the upper-class speaker's oral text as it would require him to speak of the characters in direct interaction with each other.

Moral Lexicon

The black student uses terminology that we traditionally associate with morality, terms such as "right" (stanza 5) and "wrong" (stanza 2), "should" (stanzas 1 and 4), "have to" (stanza 3), and "could" (stanzas 4 and 5). He appeals to moral principles ("which is wrong," stanza 2), though without stating the source or identity of these principles. He stresses social relationships. Sinbad was wrong to ask Abigail to sleep with him "just" to get her across the river when she wanted to see "her loved one." What seems to be wrong here is that the request violates the love relationship between Gregory and Abigail. Ivan did the right thing because his social relationship of friendship does not make the problem his business. Abigail is wrong because she laughed and thus didn't take seriously the violence she was having Slug perpetrate. For this speaker, morality seems to be a matter of following moral precepts, not violating social relationships, and taking such relationships seriously.

The white speaker, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, doesn't use traditional moral terminology. Instead he uses the language of "reasons" and "reason giving." Sinbad is offensive because he didn't have a good enough reason for what he did (stanza 1). Gregory was wrong not to listen to a reason from Abigail (stanza 2). Slug wasn't that offensive because his reason (compassion) is acceptable (stanza 4). In fact, psychological states are in general mitigating: witness Abigail's dejection in stanza 3 and Slug's compassion in stanza 4. The speaker states a version of the "golden rule" in stanza 2 (essentially a device for computing what is rational): "he might have done the same if he was put in the same position." For this speaker, failing to act seems inherently exonerating (there appear to be only sins of commission, not of omission): Ivan is the least objectionable because he "didn't do anything" and so "offended no one," and Abigail didn't tell Slug to beat up Gregory so "she really didn't have any bearing." This speaker's "moral system" appears to be something like: an act (or an inaction) is right so long as it offends no one and the actor has a reason to do it, where psychological states (dejection, compassion) are mitigating factors. In computing reasons one should, beyond considering mitigating psychological states, consider what one would have done in the same circumstances. This is morality as rationality and psychology, not as social networks and responsibilities.

The upper-class speaker has a view of morality that is based not on a traditional moral vocabulary, nor on a social network of mutual ties, nor on a process of rationality and decision based on reasons. Rather, he carries the white speaker's focus on psychological states to an extreme. Morality is a matter of two things: (a) the feelings and point of view (inner states) of the characters and (b) the feelings, sensitivities, and point of view of the speaker (or his group). And it is really the latter that predominates. The upper-class speaker starts his whole oral text by saying that "we can all sort of like come

around [to] seeing other people's point of view," implying that the extent to which I can understand your point of view (thus the extent to which you are *like* me) determines the extent to which you are exonerated. Sinbad is ranked first (worst) because "*we couldn't see* any real good in what Sinbad was doing," where it is left entirely tacit what "good" means here. Gregory comes in second because "he hit a nerve" (*of ours*); "he was just ranked as an emotional reaction" (*of ours*). "*We didn't like* Slug's name." "*We weren't really comfortable* with Abigail at all." The focus is on how the speaker views (sees) the character or how the character affects the speaker. But the heart of the matter is really whether or not the character is "like us" (and ultimately none of them are). We can see this even where the speaker at first seems to say he can understand the point of view of "the other" (a character in the story). In each case, he actually severely mitigates the claim that he can understand the other's point of view. In stanza 3, for example, he says "we can sort of" understand Gregory and Slug's points of view *but* Gregory and Slug could have done something better (what they could have done we are not told, nor what constitutes "better"). The "but" right after saying that we can "sort of see" Slug and Gregory's points of view actually contradicts the claim that we can see their points of view and stresses "sort of" as a mitigator of the claim. What follows "but" seems, then, to imply that what is wrong is that Gregory and Slug aren't like us, don't affect us well; we can't recognize their act as something we would have done, though we can't say in fact what we would have done. As for Abigail, in stanza 4, the speaker says "we weren't really comfortable with Abigail at all," though "we could see this. . .desperate attempt at love," "we had sort of empathy," "you can sort of understand her being embittered." He thus, once again, mitigates the claim that he can see a character's point of view or empathize with one. Presumably it is the fact that he can "sort of" (almost) understand and empathize with Abigail's internal states (bitterness, desperation) that allows him to rank Abigail as relatively inoffensive, though he still has a good deal of disdain even for her. Ivan gets closest to being accepted without disdain, because he was perceptive (could "see") enough to realize that the internal states of these other characters aren't acceptable to one's (our) sensitivities. Morality is then a type of seeing, seeing the internal states of others and judging how they affect one's own sensitivities, where the standard of judgment is oneself or people like us. The world is not just privatized and psychologized, it is solipsistic.

Construal of Social Relations

The black speaker frequently construes the relationships between the characters in terms of overt social interaction and dialogue, not internal states ["asked her" (stanza 1); direct quote in stanza 2; "told him" (stanza 3); "said" (stanza 3); "laughed and said" (stanza 4); "told" (stanza 4); "laughed" (stanza 4);

"saying" (stanza 5); direct quote in stanza 5]. He construes the story as a set of overt social encounters. The white speaker rarely uses this device, but rather stresses internal psychological states (in stanza 1, Sinbad is offensive not because he asked Abigail to sleep with him, but because he "wants" to sleep with her; in stanza 2, Gregory tosses Abigail aside without "thinking"; in stanza 3, Abigail is "dejected" and this explains her behavior; in stanza 4, Slug is compassionate; and in stanza 5, Ivan offends no one's sensibilities). The white speaker's world is more privatized than the black speaker's, with less stress on the social and more on the psychological.

For the upper-class speaker, the social-interaction aspects of the characters' relationships to each other are further attenuated beyond even what we find with the White speaker. The characters never directly confront each other in any stanza. For example, Abigail is never mentioned in stanza 1 where Sinbad is mentioned, and becomes "this girl" (not Abigail) in stanza 2 where Gregory is mentioned. In stanza 3 Gregory is at first just "someone" Slug beat up, and though both Gregory and Sinbad are mentioned in the stanza it is in relation to the speaker, not to each other. In stanza 4 no other character is mentioned in relation to Abigail; and in stanza 5 Ivan has an attitude toward the characters as a whole, not a relationship to Abigail. The psychologized and privatized world of the previous white speaker is here carried to an absolute extreme.

Force and Directness of Text

The black speaker expresses his oral text directly and with force. He uses very few hedges or mitigating devices. The white speaker, on the other hand, uses a great number of "hedges" or "mitigating devices," words and phrases like "mainly," "you know," "kind of," "really," which either mitigate the force of a claim made, lessen the force with which a property is attributed to a character, or worry about the extent to which the hearer may agree or disagree with a claim. The black speaker uses only 6 such devices, and several of the few he uses do not in fact really function as a hedge, e.g., the "just" in stanza 1 (line 5) is stressed and the "just" in stanza 2 (line 3) is followed by "totally" which virtually removes any mitigating force it might have had. On the other hand, the white speaker uses 20 hedges and all of them function fully as mitigators. The upper-class speaker is more similar to the white speaker than to the black one, but once again takes what the white speaker does to an extreme. He uses 39 hedges. But added to this already greater amount, he does something neither the white or black speaker does: he repeatedly uses words or phrases that refer to acts of perception (all of them refer to vision or are the word "seemed"). Perception is inherently relative to one perspective/point of reference, and thus also functions as a mitigator of the force or universality of a claim. The more mitigating devices one uses, the less one appears to be concerned with the content of one's claim and the more with the fact that one is making it. The upper-

class speaker appears to use these devices to modulate the relationship between him and the claim he is making, as well as the relationship between himself and the characters in the story. He is always aware of himself as the point from which the claim is made or the character is judged. The table below shows the number and type of mitigating devices used by each of the students and the perception terms used by the upper-class speaker:

TABLE 1:
LISTS OF HEDGES/MITIGATING DEVICES AND PERCEPTION TERMS

BLACK	WHITE	UPPER CLASS	
		sort of (5)	see (5)
just (3)	just (2)	like (3)	seeing
you know (2)	mainly (2)	come around	point of view (3)
true	you know (5)	seemed (3)	seemed (3)
	kind of (2)	pretty (2)	perceptive
Total = 6	really (4)	just (5)	
	only (2)	I think (2)	Total = 13
	we figured (2)	you know (8)	
	I mean	I mean (2)	
		really (3)	
	Total = 20	yeah (2)	
		well	
		we figured	
		maybe	
		Total = 39	

Summary

Having looked at these five features, the differences among the three speakers are clear. The black speaker (a) makes his claims from a universalist perspective; (b) stresses social relationships, both in telling the story (treating the teacher as sharing knowledge with him, and refusing to seal off the verbal interaction of the group from either his oral text or the written one) and in discussing the characters in the story; and (c) empathizes with the characters. The white speaker (a) seals off the oral and written texts from each other and from the interaction that led up to the oral text; (b) seals off his knowledge from that of the teacher and vice-versa; and (c) distances himself from the characters and treats them as privatized individuals, concentrating on their internal mental and psychological states. The upper-class speaker (a) sees characters as aspects of his own sensitivities and (b) is most impressed by himself (or his group, people like himself) as the focal point of judgment and perception. The social world collapses solipsistically into his mind. If this were literature, we might say that the black student eclipses the voice of the narrator in favor of the outside social world; the white student keeps the narrator's voice clear and

separate from the story line and enters into the mental life of his characters; and the upper-class student eclipses the social world in favor of the narrator's voice, the world becoming simply a reflection of the narrator's vision. We should keep in mind that powerful fiction has been written in all three of these modes. Looking at literature historically, and cross-culturally, however, I believe we can say that the first of these is, as we linguists say, "unmarked" (the "norm," "basic," "foundational"). But that is another story for another time.

My final point here can be made by continuing the analogy with literature. Consider the words: "a rose-red city half as old as time" (William Burgon, written for a poetry composition in 1845). When these words were written they meant to Burgon something like "the city of Petra, which contains a temple hewn out of red rock, is half as old [founded 1080 B.C.] as time [5849 years old, since Adam was created in the year 4004 B.C., as the men of Burgon's generation thought of such things]." To us, these words could well be glossed as something like the following, taken from Hugh Kenner's commentary on this line in his book *The Pound Era* (pp. 123–124): against measureless Time, "half as old" expends itself and dissolves, carrying with it into unfathomable mists the sunset connotations of "rose-red." Burgon felt behind his line "an exactitude nearly neo-Classical," where later we feel the "touchstone of the Romantic Indefinite." The words must be read against some tradition; against none they are perfectly meaningless. My argument here is that the same is true of what we often consider literacy or literacy skills (whether by this we mean the ability to read or write, or the sort of syntax one uses, or anything else). They are meaningful only against the "tradition"—the amalgam of affective, cognitive, linguistic, and interactional abilities—that each of us is.