

‘Being Literate’: Heidegger, Cavell and our Relationship to Language

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This paper considers how we understand what it is to be literate. It contrasts the common understanding of this term as a state of having acquired a limited set of skills, with a richer conception of a relationship to language. In seeking to describe this relationship, the paper considers Heidegger’s writings on the ontological structures of Dasein and explores how useful Heidegger’s thinking might be to a discussion of being literate. It considers in particular the ideas of ‘forgetfulness of being’ and ‘temporality’ from Heidegger’s major work, ‘Being and Time’ and then, from his later work on language, discusses language as ‘calling’ and the ‘experiences we undergo with language’. The paper then moves to discuss how Henry David Thoreau’s ‘Walden’, and Stanley Cavell’s readings of this work, show what the possibilities are of a relationship to reading and writing. In the fuller expression that they give to perfectionist ideas of the development and transformation of self and society through language, I find possibilities for a richer understanding of being literate.

It was whilst browsing through a library database recently that I came across the following intriguing titles of papers published in journals:

‘Literate Programming in Quantum Chemistry’ (Quiney and Wilson, 2005);

‘The Need for Assessment Literate Teachers’ (Kohn, 2009);

‘Rural African American Clergy: Are They Literate on Late-Life Depression?’
(Stansbury *et al.*, 2009);

‘Educating Earth-Literate Leaders’ (Martin and Jucker, 2005);

‘Becoming Spatially Literate: What Makes Geography Geography?’ (McInerney, 2008);

‘Becoming Environmentally Literate Citizens’ (Groenke and Puckett, 2006).

What interested me in all these examples is that the word 'literate', most commonly associated with our learning to read and write, seems to have become just another byword for skill, competence or ability to use specific knowledge. What lies behind the choice of the term 'literate' in each of these cases seems to be the idea that there is a body of knowledge that each individual needs, and a set of associated skills that they should develop in order for them to function appropriately and effectively in their discipline. Let us take one of the examples above, that of the 'assessment literate teacher'. Here, Lawrence Kohn proposes that teachers need knowledge of, and skills in, the use of formative assessment strategies; that they need to share clear learning targets with pupils; use language appropriate to the pupils' abilities; aid pupils in tracking their own learning, and that they need to give timely and descriptive feedback. This is what amounts to being assessment literate for a teacher. He summarises it like this: "assessment literate" is broad, and includes knowledge and skills associated with education measurement, accountability testing, and classroom summative assessments' (Kohn, 2009, p. 35).

This paper takes as its starting point the phrase 'to be literate' and asks whether we can understand what it is to read and to write solely in terms of the acquisition and demonstration of skill and knowledge, and what might be blocked by such an understanding. Before turning to discuss being literate, let me first begin by considering two scenarios. .

BEING AN ARTIST AND BEING A HISTORIAN

Let us imagine a young child, sitting at home, crayoning on a piece of paper. It would seem ludicrous to suggest in any meaningful way that the young child is an artist. A comment along the lines of "She's such a little artist" might be made in an affectionate and encouraging way by an onlooker to draw attention to the child's developing skill or enjoyment of the activity, but nothing more serious would be inferred. This is not just because of the age of the child. Take a further example of a teenage boy sitting in a school history lesson listening to the teacher talk about the Romans and spread of their culture throughout Europe. The boy is then directed to consider some artifacts and records and then answer a series of questions to demonstrate his understanding of the lesson. Can this boy be considered a historian? The most likely response is not, or perhaps not yet. What both children are engaging in is a learning process: how to manipulate the crayon to make marks; how to join those marks to represent recognisable objects; how to interpret sources of evidence to make sense of historical events.

In both these cases, being a historian or being an artist—just as being a physicist, a writer, a farmer, or a teacher—is not something that a person achieves at any fixed point in time, as if there were some kind of state or telos that could be attained easily, and measured. A person may complete a course of training and qualify as a teacher, even be employed as a teacher. Similarly our young child may graduate from a university with a fine art degree, offer her own work to a gallery and begin to make money from her sales. Our teenage boy may gain employment in a museum service helping the community with local history projects. But this is not all of what being an artist, or being a historian, consists in. Being a historian must entail the development of knowledge of history and the skills expected of a historian in analysing evidence, for example.

But it is more than this; perhaps more than simply working within the profession itself allows: to be a historian is to recognise that it is an ongoing concern, that there is no easily definable state of 'being a historian'. Being a historian must entail the development of certain knowledge and skills, but it is also engagement with a life's work, a commitment to this project, a striving, a longing, a desire. This recognises that there are some kinds of things that people do that are only realised adequately if they are understood to be ongoing and to involve sustained commitment. What this shows is that the important thing about understanding some possibilities for human beings is that they must be projective in some way.

BEING LITERATE

Whilst few would argue seriously that being a historian, an artist and such like, is not an ongoing process, and that in some sense we only ever become these things, something very different is often seen to be at work when discussing 'being literate'. In this case, there seems to be a general acceptance that people are literate, or not. The very idea of such a dichotomy presupposes that this state of being literate can be measured and quantified in a way that allows such categorisations. This dichotomy is embedded most clearly in measures such as the International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 1994 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which aimed to identify the percentage of citizens who were literate, to then enable international comparisons and to target policy and funding.¹ At a national level in England the dichotomy prevails. Children in schools are tested to ascertain whether they have reached the requisite literacy level for their age, and such statistics are published in school league tables. But why should being literate (or not) be considered so differently from being a historian or an artist? Perhaps it is because to think of artists and historians is to think of a profession or a vocation. What is central to these examples is the identity of the person concerned, how they view themselves and how others see them as part of a community of like minded members. But is there also something more at stake when we talk of being literate? To equate being literate with having been judged to have reached a particular level of skill or competency is to misunderstand the nature of our relationship with language—spoken or written. It is more meaningful to think about our relationship to language in light of Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas of perfectionism, and to talk instead of '*becoming* literate'. This does not mean that education, in the school years or beyond, should not encourage students to be articulate and to become confident with all manner of texts. Rather it is to conceive of being literate as characterised by a different and richer engagement with language, one that is not merely equated with the acquisition of a particular set of basic level competencies.

To be an artist is to be concerned with a subject (art in its broadest terms) and to identify with a community that has a similar, ongoing engagement with the subject. It is to give one's time and attention to one's art; to have a certain openness to the traditions and to the developments within art, and to make one's own contributions to art and to the community of fellow artists. But surely our being literate is not significantly different. There is a subject here that is the focus of ongoing engagement: written or spoken language. Those who are literate—who are becoming literate—need to give their time and attention to it, to cognisance of the traditions within language that

they inherit and to the ways in which they enrich the language they use. This is not to argue that literacy, or indeed being literate in the commonly understood sense, is unimportant. Being able to use language, to interpret signs, to read and to listen, to speak and to write, in all their iterations, are part of what it means to be a human. Such skills need to be learned, whether from traditions, communities or from more formal education in schools. In this sense, the definition of literacy as 'the ability to read, write and speak in English . . . at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general' (DfEE, 1999, foreword) is justified. But what is needed in considering what it means to be literate is not a new definition, but a shift in emphasis to give attention to how our relationship to, and responsibility for, language are part of what it means to be human.

HEIDEGGER, LANGUAGE AND BEING LITERATE

Let me now turn to the work of Martin Heidegger. His work is potentially relevant to my project here, as his writings after *die Kehre*—the turn—engages with the subject of language and our relation to it (Heidegger, 1971a; 1971b). Arguably of more significance is that his major work, *Being and Time* (1962), is directly concerned with an in-depth analysis of the meaning of being, and what it means to be human in the world. In light of this, we might propose that aspects of Heidegger's thought would be particularly pertinent to an understanding of being literate. This is not to say that it is necessarily a straightforward task to consider Heidegger's work alongside a pressing issue in contemporary education. Heidegger's highly individualistic language, especially the stylised poetic expression that characterises his later work, is one barrier. A further factor is that his work is not overtly concerned with questions of practical philosophy such as education. But let us persevere with trying out some alignment of four aspects of Heidegger's thinking with the ideas of an ongoing relationship to language and to the self which I argue contribute to a notion of being literate.

(i) *The 'Forgetfulness of Being'*

In *Being and Time* Heidegger breaks with the dominant traditions that he had inherited, namely epistemology and metaphysics. He argues here for a different way of understanding how our being is bound in relationship to the world. This shift was needed, he argued, not because there is no possibility of objective truth about our being, but rather because the ways that epistemology and metaphysics operate do not allow us to discern it fully. Pádraig Hogan summarises the point like this: 'the truth that philosophy was seeking did not disclose itself in its fullness to human existence' (Hogan, 2002, p. 216). Modern philosophy since Descartes, with its focus on the external world and the mind, and the interplay of these within the Western tradition of philosophy, leads to the dominance on enquiries into 'entities' rather than the 'being' itself. But the radical contribution of *Being and Time* is the conclusion that metaphysics and epistemology cannot speak adequately about human existence. Such unattainability is not something that can be overcome; it is an ongoing feature of the human condition. This departure for Heidegger—

what Hogan refers to as his 'leavetaking'—opens up new possibilities. The 'forgetfulness of Being' that Heidegger claims has characterised epistemology and metaphysics leads him to different priorities: first to give attention to enquiries into existence rather than knowledge, of ontology as opposed to epistemology; second to consider the nature of Being, the way things 'are'; and third, the nature of human existence, of *Dasein*.²

We might argue that Heidegger's term 'forgetfulness' (*Seinsvergessenheit*) of being' can be seen as a useful way of drawing attention to how we are in the world in relation to language and to how this is part of our human condition. Currently, the prevalent ways of thinking that dominate policy and practice in literacy education are those that view the individual as a user of language, as if language were a toolbox and its users mechanics, selecting the correct instrument with which to perform a given task. Any idea of being literate, characterised by an ongoing relationship to our words, is forgotten, and language is rather conceived instrumentally, as a means to a communicative end, its users in need of training, through education, to manipulate language to achieve certain social and political goals. Competence in this kind of language use is heavily prescribed and easily measured through standardised tests, with those who can perform the requisite language tasks at a given point in time being deemed 'literate'. Recent challenges to this unashamedly functionalist way of thinking about literacy, in favour of an idea of literacy as social practice (Barton *et al.*, 2000), have generally failed to challenge dominant perspectives on literacy. The idea prevails that what constitutes being literate *is* competence in a limited range of productive and receptive language tasks. This then feeds the kind of national and international measures and comparisons of literacy rates, and the moral panics over the links between illiteracy and social cohesion.

Whilst significant consideration has been given by educators, policy makers and academics to understandings of literacy over the years, scant attention has been given to the idea of what it means to be literate, other than to draw a simplistic, causal relationship between achievement of a particular set of (low-level) skills and the state of being literate. But what this insistence on skills fails to account for adequately is our relationship to language as a way of being-in-the-world. Heidegger's writings on language, and in particular his rejection of then current views of speaking (Heidegger, 1971a; 1971b), seem to foreshadow the kind of dominant discourses (characterised by a forgetfulness of Being) to which I have referred and which pervade contemporary literacy teaching and learning. It is in his reflections on the relationship of man's being to language, and on the possibility of our experience with language that Heidegger's work resonates most closely with the vision of what it means to be literate with which I am concerned. Clearly Heidegger's concern in *Being and Time* is with the existential nature of Being, and this is not what first comes to mind when we commonly think of 'being literate'. But if we are to understand the human being well, we must understand our being literate as being embedded in it as something like an existential structure. To be human is to be mortal and it is to be a language being. Perhaps we can say, then, that our standing in relation to language is not an ontic—a contingent—condition, but rather an ontological structure.³

(ii) *Experiences We Undergo with Language*

In the opening sections of his essay *Language*, Heidegger draws attention to the fact of a relationship between man and the language, and the naturalness, as it were, of his speaking: 'We speak because speaking is natural to us . . . Man is said to have language by nature . . . only speech enables man to be the living being he is as man. It is as one who speaks that man is—man' (Heidegger, 1971a, p. 189). The fact that this relationship is drawn enables us at one level to distinguish humans from animals, who, whilst they may communicate in some basic sense and out of instinct, do not possess the speech that characterises humans. But he then develops this idea of speech in relation to man's being: 'In any case, language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man's being . . . To discuss language, to place it, means to bring to its place of being not so much language as ourselves; our own gathering into the appropriation' (pp. 189–190). What is being pursued here is the intimacy, the compelling nature of the relationship between our being and our language that denies those definitions of what it means to speak, to use language, that equate it with what Heidegger refers to as 'audible expression and communication of human feelings . . . a presentation and representation of the real and unreal' (p. 192). Here there is a strong rejection of speech as *merely* human performance whose only function is effective communication. Whilst he acknowledges that there is overwhelming evidence in grammar, linguistics and in logic, and a commonsense acceptance that language performs this purpose, this should not be taken as evidence of its *singular* purpose.

Charles Taylor's analysis of Heidegger's approach to language is that in his later work he rejects the enframing theory whereby language is understood within a general framework of human life but merely fulfils some function within it. There are strong hints here of the dominant ways of understanding literacy and being literate to which I have already referred. Taylor links this enframing view with Hobbes and Locke, where words are given meaning by being linked with ideas that represent them. But Taylor prefers to situate Heidegger's view of language within what he calls the 'expressive-constitutive' theory. Here the emphasis is placed on the new purposes and meanings that language makes possible. One of its central tenets is that it is through language that disclosure to human beings takes place. It may be this that is what is being proposed when Heidegger states: 'In its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man. *Language speaks*' (p. 197 *italics mine*). In a Heideggerian view, then, the relationship between being and language is an ineluctable one.

But Heidegger says of language:

Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain it in language through their speech (Heidegger, 1947/1978, p. 217).

He here distances himself entirely from views of language that reduce it to a mere instrument either of thought or of communication, and from the kind of 'gathering information about language'—metalanguage which he claims is intrinsic to work in linguistics and in analytic philosophy. Metalinguistics here reminds Heidegger of metaphysics, and he decries it as 'the

thoroughgoing technicalization of all language' (Heidegger, 1971b, p. 58). Here again there are strong resonances in Heidegger's critique of language with current approaches, both in policy and in practice, to views of literacy and being literate. The latter emphasises the technical approaches to language aimed at mastering communication. This seems far distant from the rich notion within Heideggerian thought of 'language fleetingly touching us with its essential being' (p. 59) which is what is at play when we undergo a thinking experience with language.

This thinking experience with language is illustrated in Heidegger's analysis of Stefan George's poem *The Word* (pp. 60ff). Here, Heidegger leads his reader through two lines of the poem, and in doing so, engages the reader in a poetic experience with language. The lines under consideration are:

*So I renounced and sadly see:
Where word breaks off no thing may be.*

Heidegger claims that in reading the lines only 'barely' or 'crudely':

we would have reduced poetry to the servant's role as documentary proof of our thinking, and have taken thinking too lightly; in fact we would already have forgotten the whole point: to undergo an experience with language (p. 63).

But to undergo an experience with language means to allow ourselves to be affected by the words on the page, to submit to them and to their claim such that 'language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence' (p. 57). This is not only Heidegger's thinking experience of language; it is the transformational encounter with language that is characteristic of our being literate.

(iii) *Language as Calling*

The powerful discourses within literacy teaching and learning of mastery in language and of measurable competence that tend to exclude any richer notion of being literate, emphasise the authority of the language user. Such a view of language, claims Taylor, one in which '[o]ur temptation right off is to see it (language) as *our* power, something we exercise; disclosure is what we bring about' (Taylor, 2005, p. 443) is one that for Heidegger would have been 'deeply erroneous'. Language seen primarily as stating what is the case—which preoccupies the epistemologist - as linguistic representation, as instrumental, that language is the 'clearing' (*Lichtung*) by which things or ideas are unconcealed, is flawed, as it again reveals a forgetfulness of being. Rather, as Taylor summarises: 'The clearing in fact comes to be only around *Dasein*. It is our being there which allows it to happen' (p. 444). Such a claim makes it necessary for us to think about language in a rather different way, one that requires our attention to it as a call (*Ruf*). This is in the sense not only of evocation (as when Heidegger makes his claim that 'language speaks'), but also as a vocation. This calling to language is one to which we must be attentive. It is also a call from the silence, as 'language speaks as the peal of

stillness' (Heidegger, 1971a, p. 207). Here, the idea of language as calling, and of calling us out of slumber, of addressing us, appealing to us, echoes the work of Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1854/1999). Stanley Cavell has drawn attention to the intersections between Thoreau's writings and Heidegger's work (Cavell, 2006), and in particular to the ways in which both thinkers are dealing, albeit in different ways, with what Cavell calls: 'this human propensity for, let us say, exiling itself from its life and its language'. The problem with which they both grapple is what Heidegger terms the dominant 'correct ideas about language' 'never bring us to language as language' (Heidegger, 1971a, p. 193).

Understanding language as *Ruf* is one of the ways in which Heidegger develops his appeal to bring us face to face with 'a possibility of undergoing a thinking experience with language' (Heidegger, 1971b, p. 73). He warns of the danger, however, of equating thinking with the methods of scientific thinking that is characterised by the asking of questions. Rather, Heidegger proposes that: 'the proper bearing of the thinking which is now needed is to listen to the grant, not to ask questions' (p. 75). Admittedly, he acknowledges that thinking as listening is a strange sounding concept, but stresses that the calling here is to a response of receptiveness, for this response clarifies what it means to undergo a thinking experience with language. The experience is one of, on the one hand the 'authority . . . dignity of the word', but at the same time of the poet's entrusting with the possession of that word and that these experiences together constitute the *Ruf*, the calling of language. Here again, Heidegger's insights into language draw attention to the division that I perceive between an idea of language as something to be mastered (through initiation into literacy and acceptable literate practices) and being literate as a way of being in the world in relation to language and being transformed by our thinking experience of it.

(iv) *Dasein and Temporality*

In setting out the question of being in *Being and Time*, Heidegger acknowledges the role of time, of temporality in human existence, and proposes this as the basic structure of Dasein's being. Temporality is revealed as a unifying aspect of Dasein in *Being and Time*, and interweaves the elements of past, present and future. For William Blattner, temporality is something more fundamental than time as it is ordinarily conceived and consists of the elements of existence, facticity and falling (Blattner, 2005) with each of these elements representing aspects of time: of future, past and present. It is the interweaving of these elements that for Heidegger constitute Dasein's authentic temporality. Dasein is therefore not temporal because it exists somehow in a particular time, but because of the unity of past, future and present that is characteristic of the Heideggerian notion of temporality. Existence is that aspect of Dasein's being that is always projecting itself forward into a way of life and to the possibilities of being. Blattner characterises it 'not as a cognitive or intellectual achievement, nor even an imaginative one, but rather a concrete form of conduct' . . . a 'pressing ahead into some way to be Dasein' (pp. 312–313). Facticity is concerned with factuality, with Dasein's existence in an environment that is already constructed by events that are now past, and falling with Dasein's (present) existence alongside and with entities in the world. What is important for our project here is Thomas Sheehan's claim that:

For Heidegger, temporality connotes becoming, and human temporality entails becoming oneself. Human becoming is a matter of living into one's future, 'standing out' (eksisting, ekstasis) towards one's possibilities (Sheehan, 1999, p. 291).

This is important as it relates to our opening discussion in the paper, of being an artist or a historian. Blattner uses the example of being a musician in his discussion of *Dasein*'s temporality. He makes an important distinction between being a musician as an occupation or a social status (with all the privileges and responsibilities that this brings) and being a musician as an existential possibility, what Heidegger calls an ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*). He summarises the latter as follows:

An existential possibility is a manner of self-understanding with which one is identified in virtue of pressing ahead into it (Blattner, 2005, p. 314).

This understanding of existential possibility in terms of being literate is one that is absent from current policy and much published research. Rather, dominant discourses tend to privilege an understanding of being literate in which it is equated with the status achieved through gaining a low level qualification. A much richer understanding of being literate is contained in the idea that a certain form of self-understanding is gained through learning the skills of literacy: traditionally, reading, listening, speaking and writing. But rather than this self-understanding leading to an identification of one's self as being literate, as an achieved state (Blattner's 'social status'), the richer notion is where being literate is seen as something that one is and yet is always still pressing ahead into.

FROM HEIDEGGER TO THOREAU AND CAVELL

We should perhaps at this point return to the anxiety expressed at the outset of the paper about considering the work of Heidegger alongside contemporary education practices and policies related to a specific idea of being literate. Has perseverance in aligning aspects of Heidegger's thinking with ideas of an ongoing relationship to language and to the self allowed a richer understanding of being literate? Perhaps the insight that an engagement with Heidegger's project can bring is that language is ontological, a basic structure of *Dasein*. Language is an *Existential* aspect pertaining to existence alongside other ontological aspects of *Dasein*'s existence: its being-in-the-world; its temporality; its way-of-being as care; its being-toward-death.

But there are differences between Heidegger and other writers to whom I make reference here (notably Thoreau, Emerson and Cavell) on the nature of being and becoming. For Heidegger, and for his ontological project, there is a sense in which being is always originary, always going back to the origins to systematically set out the nature of *Dasein*. For writers such as Thoreau, and especially in the perfectionist writings of Emerson (and both writers as interpreted by Stanley Cavell) the idea of *becoming* is given precedence. It is not that Heidegger rejects the idea of *Dasein*'s becoming; indeed, *Dasein*'s 'temporality means being present by becoming what one already is' (Sheehan, 1998, p. 307). It is rather that in Emerson, and especially in

Thoreau, human becoming is marked by ideas of leaving, departure, lack of settlement and sojourning that are not given the same force of expression in Heidegger. Whilst Heidegger's work draws attention to Dasein's temporality and all that is implied here for the potentiality of being, the work of Cavell, and his readings of Thoreau and Emerson on the self, give much fuller expression to perfectionist ideas of the development and transformation of self and society through language, and in particular to what it is to read and write (philosophy). In Thoreau and Cavell, we language is not just of originary importance, but, more specifically, there is something especially important about writing; Thoreau clearly sees it as essential to what he calls our uncommon schooling, our becoming adult.

Thoreau writes of our uncommon schooling, but Cavell also explores the education of the self through what he calls Ralph Waldo Emerson's Moral Perfectionism (Cavell, 1990). Here, perfectionism is an orientation towards a better self that has no finality, is always partial and on its way. One of the themes in Emerson's perfectionism is the idea of journeying (though education or cultivation) to a further state of becoming, of the self. This journeying is a necessary part of one's becoming; it is in the constant losing of the self (the lack of settlement and leaving) that is its finding. We might think here of two stories that illustrate the different emphases within Heidegger and Cavell (and his readings of Thoreau and Emerson) on being and the self, and why the latter is more important for our understanding of being literate. On the one hand, the story of The Odyssey, of Odysseus' epic journey home to Ithaca, is about a return to origins. In contrast, the story of Abraham's departure into and wandering in the wilderness is concerned with a man and his people's journey, their individual and political becoming. If to be literate requires a relationship to one's self, and to one's language in the practices of reading and writing, that are perfectionist in the Emersonian sense, then, as with Heidegger, we should persist with seeing where this literature might open onto new ways of thinking.

(v) *Being Literate: A Relationship to the Self*

At the outset of this paper, I used the terms 'artist' and 'historian' for practical reasons to refer to and to identify individuals; but they are only ever on their way to being these people. This is not to say that we should not talk of people being historians, artists and so on; that would be to misconstrue Emerson. Rather, what Emerson is critiquing is the tendency to see everything in terms of fixed ends, that is, teleologically. The intention here is not to challenge the idea that individuals should develop skills and knowledge (including in reading and writing) to help them achieve their desired goals. It is, however, to question the idea that 'being anything' happens once and for all, at a defined point in time. It is rather to see 'being' as 'becoming' in the way that Emerson saw the development of the self, that: 'Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn' (Emerson, 1995, p. 252). Emerson does not intend perfectibility, but calls instead for an idea of the deferred self, one that is constantly in a state of creation and transformation. For Cavell, this is not suggestive of 'one unattained/attainable self that we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that "having" "a" self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts' (Cavell, 1990, p. 12).

(vi) *Being Literate: A Relationship to Language*

But for Thoreau, Emerson's contemporary, this relationship to the self is one that should also be seen in relation to language. We are always on the way to, and in the process of, acquiring what he calls the father tongue. Whilst we acquire our mother tongue, our spoken language, almost naturally, through our 'common schooling' through family and community, the process of acquiring the father tongue is somewhat different. What is needed here is a relationship to (written) words that is characterised by a leaving and returning, a letting go and taking hold, a daily death and rebirth into language and into our words. The father tongue is characterised by a mature relationship to language, one in which we are, as it were, at 'a bent arm's length' from our words, experiencing their strangeness and our estrangement from them. This is their call to us, their unsettling appeal, what Cavell terms the 'disorientation . . . the disturbed relation to our language' (Cavell, 2006, p. 220) that he sees not only in Thoreau, but also in Emerson.

This is somewhat different, though, to Heidegger's 'undergoing a thinking experience with language'. For Thoreau and for Cavell in particular, our relationship with language can be thought of as an *en-counter*. To encounter something is suggestive of our coming upon it unexpectedly. But the word's origins in the Old French also hint at an adversarial relation, one of confrontation or opposition. Whilst this is mature father tongue relation to language, it is very different from the poetic experience with language that Heidegger describes. Encountering language reflects, to some extent, the challenge of the thinking processes at work in the psychoanalytic relationship. Here, in reading, for example, the language of the text possesses us, reads us, and elicits something like confession. This is what human beings are sentenced to if they are awake to the possibilities of language. This is the kind of responsibility to language, and relationship to it, that Thoreau acknowledges when he says:

If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow (Thoreau, 1954/1999, p. 78).

(vii) *Towards Being Literate*

That departure should characterise our lives generally and our relationship to language is a constant theme in Thoreau. One particular section of *Walden* is worth re-visiting here. Thoreau used the image of an axe, borrowed from his neighbours for the purpose of cutting down trees to build his hut in the woods. Having used the tool, he returns the tool to his neighbours sharper than when he borrowed it. Cavell shows us that Thoreau's axe is our language, and that we have a responsibility for it and to it (Cavell, 1981). The language we use is, in some sense, only ever on loan. In fact, the tool is never owned, it is only ever borrowed and returned sharper to the community from whence it came. The words that our culture offers us are words that have been used by others before us, and we can, as it were, merely take them and pass them on. This use of language is characterised by resort to such devices as empty cliché that have the effect of blunting and dulling meaning when spoken, heard, read or written. But, in contrast, to borrow the

language and to return it sharper than we received it is not to reinforce our everyday, unthinking acceptance of the way things are; it is to do something *new* with our words, something that revitalises rather than deadens language. Thoreau's metaphor of the axe is useful in understanding our temporality in the context of language use. In speaking and in writing, we must always begin by borrowing words that have been passed down to us (and here there are clear indications of what has *been passed* and the *past*). But we use and sharpen that language in the present, and pass it on for future generations. In doing this with language, though, our own selves are transformed and we are pressing ahead into the possibility of being literate.

But the metaphor of the axe also reminds us of Thoreau hoeing his fields of beans in *Walden*, and of how the lines he cuts into the earth with his hoe are like the lines of writing on a page. This comparison is developed again in Seamus Heaney's poem, *Digging*, where the memory of his grandfather cutting turf in the peat bog with a spade leads him to reflect on his own writing, and he ends the poem with the lines:

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it* (Heaney, 1990, p. 1).

The whole process of cutting, whether digging the earth, hoeing furrows to plant crops, or of etching words on a page, occurs temporally. The cutting itself effects change, and so has a dynamic quality. Just as a ploughed field is changed through the cutting, so words etch something new into the public realm and the world unfolds through the writing (or speaking) of words and our responses to them. This is the becoming of the world of which language and our being literate, is a part.

Heidegger's complex account of Dasein is based on his identification of fundamental existential structures in our human existence as we ordinarily know it. But what is afforded by Cavell, Emerson and Thoreau is a richer account of the self in relationship to language. This offers a glimpse into another basic relationship of our being to the world: what it means to be literate. This raises the question of whether this needs necessarily be a relationship to the written word. Thoreau focuses clearly on this in his references to the father tongue which is most often acquired in relation to the written word. Heidegger prefers to talk of language speaking, even when he is dealing with the written word in poetry. But this is not to claim that those communities and societies that do not operate within a tradition of the written word are illiterate or pre-literate as we ordinarily understand these terms. A shift in our thinking is required here if we are to argue that 'being literate' is such a structure within our human existence. This shift requires us to put aside an understanding of 'literate' with its connotations solely of skill acquisition, and to embrace a richer, perfectionist notion of 'being literate' which requires an ongoing transformation of the self through language. The relationship between our human existence and our language that is given powerful expression in Emerson, in Thoreau and to some extent in Heidegger, is much closer to the vision of being literate that I am suggesting than other iterations currently allow.

NOTES

1. International bodies such as The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) are also involved in measuring and recording literacy/illiteracy rates around the world through their Institute of Statistics. Other trans-national bodies such as the United Nations perform a similar task. Measures vary depending on the definition of 'literacy' used, and whether the statistics are gathered from empirical data through testing, or from an analysis of the percentage of the population who are deemed to be literate as a result of having received a minimum numbers of years of schooling.
2. Heidegger wants actively to avoid terms such as 'human existence' or 'human being on the grounds that these are fatefully loaded with the very metaphysics that he thinks needs to be overcome.
3. In *Being and Time* Heidegger draws a distinction between the study of entities and the investigation of the being of entities; this has come to be known as the ontological difference. The terminology here is important: if ontology is understood as the general investigation of Being, Heidegger uses 'ontic' to refer to the contingent facts about entities, whereas 'ontological' pertains discussions of Being. We can talk therefore of the ontic aspects of entities: they live in a certain place; do a particular job; look a particular way; are in certain relationships with other entities. These are the *Existentiell* (ontic) aspects of an individual *Dasein's* own existence. But these are not concerns of Being. To make this difference clear, Heidegger uses the term ontological to refer to the more basic structures of *Dasein*; these are the *Existential* aspects pertaining to existence.

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