# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ACT OF READING*

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*The question of the importance of reading is addressed by considering the ways in which experience itself is read through the interaction of the self and the world. Through examining memories of childhood, it is possible to view objects and experiences as texts, words, and letters and to see the growing awareness of the world as a kind of reading through which the self learns and changes. The actual act of reading literary texts is seen as part of a wider process of human development and growth based on understanding both one's own experience and the social world. Learning to read must be seen as one aspect of the act of knowing and as a creative act. Reading the world thus precedes reading the word and writing a new text must be seen as one means of transforming the world.*

In all my years in the practice of teaching — which is political practice as well — I have rarely allowed myself the task of inaugurating or closing meetings and congresses. I have, nevertheless, agreed to speak here, though as informally as possible, about the importance of the act of reading.

In attempting to speak about the importance of reading, it is indispensable for me to say something about my preparation for being here today, something about the process I inserted myself into while writing the text I now read, a process which involved a critical understanding of the act of reading. Reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world. Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context.

As I began writing about the importance of the act of reading, I felt myself drawn enthusiastically to *re-reading* essential moments in my own practice of reading whose memory I retained from the most remote experiences of childhood, from adolescence, from young manhood, when a critical understanding of the act of reading took shape in me. In writing

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this text, I put objective distance between myself and the different moments in which the act of reading occurred in my existential experience: first, reading the world, the tiny world in which I moved; afterwards, reading the word, not always the word-world in the course of my schooling.

Recapturing distant childhood as far back as I can trust my memory, trying to understand my act of *reading* the particular world in which I moved was absolutely significant for me. Surrendering myself to this effort, I re-created and re-lived in the text I was writing, the experience I lived at a time when I did not yet read words.

I see myself then in the average Recife house where I was born, encircled by trees. Some of the trees were like persons to me, such the intimacy between us. In their shadow I played, and in the branches susceptible to my height I experienced the small risks which prepared me for greater risks and adventures. The old house, its bedrooms, hall, attic, terrace — the setting for my mother's ferns — the back yard where the terrace was located, all this was my first world. In this world I crawled, gurgled, first stood up, took my first steps, said my first words. Truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perceptual activity, and therefore as the world of my first reading. The *texts*, the *words*, the *letters* of that context were incarnated in a series of things, objects, signs. In perceiving these, I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perceptual capacity increased. I learned to understand things, objects, signs through using them in relationship to my older brothers and sisters and my parents.

The *texts*, *words*, *letters* of that context were incarnated in the song of the birds — tanager, flycatcher, thrush; in the dance of boughs blown by the strong winds announcing storms; thunder and lightning; rain waters playing with geography: creating lakes, islands, rivers, streams. The *texts*, *words*, *letters* of that context were incarnated as well in the whistle of the wind, the clouds of the sky, the sky's color, its movement; in the color of foliage, the shape of leaves, the fragrance of flowers — roses, jasmine; in tree trunks; in fruit rinds: the varying color tones of the same fruit at different times — the green of a mango when the fruit is first forming, the green of a mango fully formed, the greenish yellow of the same mango ripening, the black spots of an overripe mango — the relationship among these colors, the developing fruit, its resistance to our manipulation, and its taste. It was possibly at this time, by doing it myself and seeing others do it, that I learned the meaning of the word *squashing*.

Animals were equally part of that context — the way the family cats rubbed themselves coyly against our legs, their mewing of entreaty or anger; the ill-humor of Joli, my father's old black dog, when one of the cats carelessly approached too near to where he was eating what was his. In

such instances, Joli's mood was completely different from when he rather sportively chased, caught, and killed one of the many opossums responsible for the disappearance of my grandmother's fat chickens.

Part of the context of my immediate world was also the language universe of my elders, expressing their beliefs, tastes, fears, values, and which linked my world to wider contexts whose existence I could not even suspect.

In the effort at recapturing distant childhood, trying to understand my act of reading the particular world in which I moved, permit me to say again, I re-created, re-lived in the text I was writing the experience I lived at a time when I did not yet read words. And something emerged which seems relevant to the general context of these reflections. I refer to my fear of ghosts. The presence of ghosts among us was a permanent topic of grown-up conversation in the time of my childhood. Ghosts needed darkness or semi-darkness in order to appear under their various forms — wailing the pain of their guilt; laughing in mockery; asking for prayers; indicating where their cask was hidden.

Now, probably until I was seven years old, the Recife neighborhood where I was born was illuminated by gaslights lined up with a certain dignity in the streets. At nightfall, the elegant lamps gave themselves to the magic wand of the lamplighters. At the door of my house I used to accompany the thin figure of my street's lamplighter from afar as he went from lamp to lamp in a rhythmic gait, the lighting taper over his shoulder. It was a fragile light, more fragile even than the light of the lamp we had inside the house; the shadows overcame the light more than the light dispelled the shadows.

There was no better environment for ghostly pranks than that one. I remember the nights in which, enveloped by my own fears, I waited for time to pass, for the night to end, for dawn's demi-light to arrive bringing with it the song of the morning birds. In morning's light my night fears ended up by sharpening my perception of numerous noises which were lost in the brightness and bustle of daytime but mysteriously underscored in night's deep silence. As I became familiar with my world, however, as I perceived and understood it better by *reading* it, my terrors diminished.

It is important to add that *reading* my world, always basic to me, did not make me grow up prematurely, a rationalist in boy's clothing. Exercising my boy's curiosity did not distort it, nor did understanding my world cause me to scorn the enchanting mystery of that world. In this I was aided rather than discouraged by my parents.

It was precisely my parents who introduced me to reading the word at a certain moment in this rich experience of understanding my immediate world. Deciphering the word flowed naturally from *reading* my particular world; it was not something superimposed on it. I learned to read and

write on the ground of the back yard of my house, in the shade of the mango trees, with words from my world rather than from the wider world of my parents. The earth was my blackboard; sticks, my chalk.

When I arrived at Eunice Vasconcellos's private school, I was already literate. Here I would like to pay heartfelt tribute to Eunice, whose recent passing away profoundly grieved me. Eunice continued and deepened my parents' work. With her, reading the word, the phrase, the sentence never entailed a break with reading the *world*. With her, reading the word meant reading the *word-world*.

A little while ago, with deep emotion, I visited the home where I was born. I stepped on the same ground on which I had first stood up, on which I first had walked, run, begun to talk, and learned to read. It was that same world which first presented itself to my understanding through my reading it. There I met again some of the trees of my childhood. I recognized them without difficulty. I almost embraced their thick trunks — young trunks in my childhood. Then, what I like to call a gentle or well-behaved nostalgia, emanating from the earth, the trees, the house, carefully enveloped me. I left the house content, feeling the joy of someone who has re-encountered loved ones.

Continuing the effort of *re-reading* fundamental moments of my childhood experience, of adolescence and young manhood — moments in which a critical understanding of the importance of the act of reading took shape in me in practice — I would like to go back to a time when I was a secondary-school student. There I gained experience in the critical interpretation of texts I read in class with the Portuguese teacher's help, which I remember to this day. Those moments did not consist of mere exercises, aimed at our simply becoming aware of the existence of the page in front of us, to be scanned, mechanically and monotonously spelled out, instead of truly read. Those moments were not *reading lessons* in the traditional sense, but rather moments in which texts were offered to our restless searching, including that of the young teacher, Jose Pessoa.

Some time afterward, as a Portuguese teacher myself in my twenties, I lived intensely the importance of the act of reading and writing — basically inseparable — with first-year high school students. I never reduced syntactical rules to charts the students had to swallow, even rules governing prepositions after certain verbs, agreement of gender and number, contractions. On the contrary, all this was proposed to the students' curiosity in a dynamic and living way, as objects to be discovered within the body of texts, whether the students' own or those of established writers, and not as something stagnant whose outline I described. The students did not have to memorize the description mechanically, but rather learn its underlying significance. Only by learning the significance could they know how to memorize it, to fix it. Mechanically memorizing the

description of an object does not constitute knowing the object. That is why reading a text taken as pure description of an object (like a syntactical rule), and undertaken to memorize the description, is neither real reading, nor does it result in knowledge of the object to which the text refers.

I believe much of our insistence as teachers that students read innumerable book chapters in one semester comes from a misunderstanding we sometimes have about reading. In my wanderings throughout the world there were not a few times when young students spoke to me about their struggles with extensive bibliographies, more to be *devoured* than truly read or studied — *reading lessons* in the old-fashioned sense, submitted to the students in the name of scientific training, and of which they had to give an account by means of reading summaries. In some bibliographies I even read references to specific pages in this or that chapter from such and such a book which had to be read: "pages 15-37."

Insistence on a quantity of readings without due internalization of texts proposed for understanding rather than mechanical memorizing reveals a magical view of the written word, a view which must be superseded. From another angle, the same view is found in the writer who identifies the potential quality of his work, or lack of it, with the quantity of pages he has written. Yet, one of the most important documents we have — Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" — is only two and a half pages long.

To avoid misinterpretation of what I'm saying, it is important to underscore that my criticism of the magical view of the word does not at all imply an irresponsible position on my part in relation to the obligation we all have, teachers and students, to read the classic literature in a given field of knowledge seriously and continually, to make the texts our own, to create the intellectual discipline without which our practice as teachers and students is not viable.

To return to that very rich moment of my experience as a Portuguese teacher, I remember as vividly as if it were today rather than a remote yesterday the times I dwelled on the analysis of the texts of Gilberto Freyre, Lins do Rego, Graciliano Ramos, Jorge Amado. I used to bring the texts from home to read with the students, pointing out syntactical aspects strictly linked to the good taste of their language. To that analysis I added commentaries on the essential differences between the Portuguese of Portugal and the Portuguese of Brazil.

In this reflection on the importance of the act of reading, I want to make clear once again that my primary effort has been to explain how I became increasingly aware of its importance in my own life. It's as if I were doing the archaeology of my understanding of the complex act of reading in my own existential experience. For this reason I have been speaking of certain moments in my childhood, adolescence, and young

manhood. I would like now to conclude by reviewing, in general terms, some aspects central to what I proposed a few years ago in the field of teaching adults to read and write.

First, I would like to reaffirm that I always saw teaching adults to read and write as a political act, an act of knowledge, and therefore as a creative act. I would find it impossible to be engaged in a work of mechanically memorizing vowel sounds, like in the exercises ba-be-bi-bo-bu, la-le-li-lo-lu. Nor could I reduce learning to read and write merely to learning words, syllables, or letters, a process of teaching in which the teacher *fills* the supposedly *empty* heads of the learners with his or her words. On the contrary, the student is the subject of the process of learning to read and write as an act of knowing and a creative act. The fact that he or she needs the teacher's help, as in any pedagogical situation, does not mean that the teacher's help annuls the student's creativity and responsibility for constructing his or her own written language and reading this language.

When, for instance, a teacher and a learner pick up an object in their hands, as I do now, they both feel the object, perceive the felt object, and are capable of expressing verbally what the felt and perceived object is. Like me, the illiterate person can feel the pen, perceive the pen, and say *pen*. I can, however, not only feel the pen, perceive the pen, and say *pen*, but also write *pen* and, consequently, read *pen*. Learning to read and write means creating and assembling a written expression for what can be said orally. The teacher cannot put it together for the student; that is the student's creative task.

I need go no further into what I've developed at different times in the complex process of teaching adults to read and write. I would like to return, however, to one point referred to elsewhere in this text because of its significance for the critical understanding of the act of reading and writing, and consequently for the project I am dedicated to, teaching adults to read and write.

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. As I suggested earlier, this movement from the world to the word and from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further, and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *re-writing* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process.

For this reason I have always insisted that words used in organizing a literacy program come from the word universe of the people who are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, dreams. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not of the teacher's experience. Surveying

what I call the word universe thus gives us the people's words, pregnant with the world, words from the people's reading of the world. We then give the words back to the people inserted in what I call *codifications*, pictures imaging real situations. The word *brick*, for example, might be inserted in a pictorial representation of a group of bricklayers constructing a house.

Before giving a written form to the popular spoken word, however, we customarily challenge the learners with a group of codified situations, so they will apprehend the word rather than mechanically memorize it. Decodifying or *reading* the situations pictured leads them to a critical perception of the meaning of culture by leading them to understand how human practice or work transforms the world. Basically, the pictures of concrete situations enable the people to reflect on their former interpretation of the world before going on to read the word. This more critical *reading* of the prior less critical *reading* of the world enables them to understand their indigence differently from the fatalistic way they sometimes view injustice.

In this way, a critical reading of reality, whether it takes place in the literacy process or not, and associated above all with the clearly political practices of mobilizing and organizing, constitutes an instrument of what Gramsci calls counter-hegemony.

To sum up, reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and *re-writing* what is read.

I would like to close by saying that for these reflections on the importance of the act of reading I resolved to adopt the procedure I used because it was consonant with my way of being and with what I am capable of doing.