

Writing at the Margins

Using Literacy to Claim One's Place in the World

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DARÍO IS HOLDING A PENCIL in a way that reveals his inexperience with the tool. He grips it with his whole hand. He makes a W, and he looks up with pride. The other features of his face—nose, eyes, cheeks—have to move to make room for the widening grin. *Mirá*, he says, look. When I ask him what letter he has made, he thinks for a moment and says, *Me parece un M*. It seems like an M.

The other boys are also busy practicing letters in the concrete room we call the library. They want to learn to write as quickly as possible. They want to learn to write their names.

When boys first arrive at El Hogar La Casita, a home for abused and abandoned children in Buenos Aires, someone has to sign for them as if for a package. The transferring official, usually a police officer, has a clipboard and some papers. A few signatures and the deed is done. Welcome to your new home.

When Darío arrived with his three brothers, not even the oldest of them, who was twelve, could read a word of those pages. He wouldn't have recognized his own name if he saw it. This is how Darío and his

brothers arrive, when they arrive at the margins of society—literally orphaned by the written word.

I learned to read and write so long ago, I can barely remember the world before words. My mother taught me to read. A series of stern Southern ladies taught me the rules and exceptions of grammar, and I learned to write at a university that dutifully guards the canon. But I have only taught writing at the margins of society—those places outside the body of the text. I have taught writing to high-school students on their last chance before dropping out, to adult ESL students studying for the GED, and to children still learning to how to hold a pencil. In those places, the written word is as precious as a diploma or as destructive as an eviction notice. Words matter.

I talked with a friend once after she returned from her student's funeral. She told me, with what sounded like shame in her voice, that she believed the young man would still be alive had he been able to read. He was nineteen. A father. He had been shot three times, and dragged from his car to the sidewalk.

It has become a sad cliché, this connection between literacy and survival. Education saves lives. It has been dramatized in Hollywood movies. We, the teachers, dispense literacy as a prophylactic. I have heard that very pitch come out of the mouths of those

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who raise money for my school in inner-city Minneapolis—“Our teachers save lives.”

But I do not teach people how to read and write to save their lives. I teach them how to read and write so that they might more rightly live or, at least, that someone might notice they are alive. I teach students how to read and write because as Paulo Freire noted, “To exist, humanly, is to name the world.” I’ve seen in my students this desire—to name the world, to make it their own. They desire to name themselves, to make sure that they exist. Their essays sometimes have more in common with the graffiti writings on the bathroom walls, *T.D. wuz here*, than the scholarly arguments I teach them to imitate. Writing, at its most personal, is about showing the outside world that we are a part of it, a way of having an out of body experience, to look down from a metaphysical height and say, *there—I am*.

At the margins, writing is a tool first and an art second. Quite practically, revision is the least of my worries as a teacher. For the adult learners in my ESL class, squatting in tiny chairs in the converted kindergarten we used for a classroom, and for my ninth-graders paralyzed by the newness of high school, and for those children orphaned by papers they cannot read, the struggle is to write anything at all. The first priority and the greatest accomplishment is creation. Never was more joy derived from one letter, than when Darío made a W. *I made that*, he seemed to say. *I brought that into existence. That, no one can take away from me.*

Darío learned to write his name, and when he wrote it with the letters spaced across the page, he staked his claim across a large territory. He then, of course, wrote his name on everything—desks, notebooks, doors, and the headboard of his bed.

The esteem with which those boys held the written word reminded me of another Argentine from a different era, Jorge Luis Borges. Words, he thought,

were invented to hold some of the magic of the world. No one understands this better than people for whom words still *are* magic. Poets and scholars

might enjoy a strain of Keats, but for the newly literate, every new phrase is a revelation. The boys at El Hogar La Casita marveled at the words they wrote.

My friend, a professor of literacy, complains that teaching about literacy is hard in academia. It’s like “teaching fish about water.” I am submerged in the literate world, but teaching at the margins lets me see the wonder that is new creation day after day.

For my students, however, the marvel is short-lived. There is a practical purpose for learning to write, even for the boys at El Hogar who practice writing their names. Their struggle is not the same as mine. I want to be reminded of the magic of words. Ultimately, they want to take the mystery out of them. It is unlikely that anyone will ask for their signatures on the next form-and-clipboard that alters the course of their lives, but they want to be ready if someone does. ☺