

Fictive Readings

Literacy Lessons: Nelson



Teaching abroad as a primary school teacher, I encountered an unforgettable child. The child, whom I call Nelson, was born into historical conditions of civil war and conflict in a small nation in the global South. Orphaned at birth, Nelson was adopted by Westerners. When he came to me at age seven, Nelson was precocious and emotionally expressive. Nelson took to me and I to him. As with some teaching encounters, profound was our brief time together.

Nelson was an unpredictable child. I remember waiting with some trepidation before the moments of his arrival at my class. Typically full of unfathomable rage and grief, Nelson tended to preempt my responses to his mental state with declarations such as, “I had a bad night.” Evidence of the bad night emerged as Nelson lashed out his insides in our class through a fantastic barrage of words and deeds. The slightest and most benign provocation sent Nelson off into a shocking flurry of phrases and activity.

Before encountering Nelson, I was given a meeting with his previous teachers. As I took notes, I was warned that the child was “offensive,” “inappropriate,” and in need of “professional help.” I was told not to tolerate his bad behavior. In that meeting both Nelson and I were put on notice: he was to behave and I was to ensure his good behavior. At stake was my credibility as a teacher and Nelson’s membership into the community of the international school. After the meeting, I realized

that not a single word was uttered about the child's well-being or how I might support his learning.

Viewing his small, painfully wire-thin body for the first time, I wondered what on earth this tiny Nelson did to provoke such hostile responses from the adults entrusted with his care. In teacher's college my classmates and I had learned to label this kind of child behaviorally disturbed. Accompanying Nelson on his frequent trips to the school psychologist, I learned that the official diagnosis for such a child is "oppositional defiance disorder," although this was just the main one of many labels the psychologist rapidly interspersed for various behaviors Nelson exhibited. Surprisingly, the school team rarely spoke of Nelson's formative histories or of his adoption by Westerners. The version of Nelson's story I received came mostly from him. Through his rapid self-disclosures I learned that from birth Nelson had suffered numerous losses of primary attachments to people and places. In my mind, this social devastation, so painfully articulated by Nelson, was a root cause of his distress. Also overlooked was the fact of Nelson's "foreign" racial and ethnic status within his adopted family and nation and new school and country. Rather than confront Nelson's personal situation, our team meetings on "the problem of Nelson" bracketed out any conversation we might have had on how to support his emotional development in the wake of a volatile past. Instead, the meetings centered mainly on teaching *me* a series of decontextualized labels and strategies, as this was the school's only method of containing Nelson's uncontrollable outbursts in the classroom.

Even before I attempted to support Nelson, I had a feeling that the strategies the psychologist offered would be of little help. Nelson did not fit the character that educational labels sought to qualify. I saw him as an extremely bright, deeply troubled boy whose forms of learning required a creative response. To the psychologist's dismay, the parents refused pharmaceutical intervention. And no matter how hard he tried in countless sessions with Nelson, the child's emotional disturbances seemed to elude the expert knowledge of this well-intended but heavy-handed psychologist. I remember Nelson declaring eloquently, to the psychologist's chagrin: "I do not actually require gold stars. I am not a circus animal."

The year progressed and Nelson showed no visible signs of improvement. The team of experts working with him for more than three years found themselves at a complete loss. They considered ejecting Nelson from the school. They might have if not for his parents'

elevated social standing within the community, my determination to support the child, and my principal's sympathy for the child's plight. In a last ditch effort to save their child, the parents, frustrated with the school system, quite naturally turned on me. They cited Nelson's trouble as my failure as his teacher. Their summation held up; after all, I had little prior knowledge and experience for managing a child deemed as difficult as Nelson.

In a bid to protect myself as I protected the child, I began to cover up Nelson's outbursts. I closed my door to professional help. I assured the team that Nelson was making progress even though he clearly was not. My principal seemed to silently share my capacity for good humor and imagination as resources for teaching Nelson. Without explicit approval, he supported my maternal inclination toward the child and left me alone to work with Nelson. Left to my own devices, I rejected the help and suggestions of colleagues and searched within for a pedagogy by which I could reach Nelson.

Self-exiled from the school community and my colleagues, I retreated inside myself and away from my teacher training. There, I rediscovered a slew of memories of another, less violently displaced child. This verbally precocious child of melancholic immigrant South Asians learned to navigate inhospitable territory with her father's thick *Webster's Dictionary* in hand. Into my deeply affected response to Nelson's emotional turmoil, I transferred my father's imperative to exploit English, hoping to turn it to Nelson's advantage. I began fashioning spectacular narratives to soothe his conflict waged with words. Through these words, of displacement, journey, estrangement, and belonging, he began to puzzle together a story that plausibly represented his inconsolable losses of formative people and places.

Even with sustained support, Nelson continued to exhibit difficulty when expressing his need. Communication of his deepest frustrations curiously paralleled his strategic use of offensive verbal expressions. His rabid verbiage consisted of a surprising yet necessary defense of himself. Nelson's jarring speech, deemed inappropriate by his guardians and teachers, had the effect of barring those who might help him. His cries for help were drowned out by his brazen and rude use of language. Through the language warfare he enacted, Nelson successfully managed to repel anyone coming remotely close to his stealthily protected insides. He repetitively informed people, "I'm not who you think I am," using existential deferral as a shield to navigate his way in a hostile world.

My creative intervention with the child hinged on his off-putting expressions of existence. I latched onto his forms of speech, and, together, we began to imaginatively unravel each detail of his shocking symbolic constructions. I viewed these strange expressions as Nelson's psychical¹ literacy: his unique idiom, accent, and incredible inner means of formally structuring fragments of thought in strange poetic form. With the hindsight of constructs offered to me by psychoanalysis, I now interpret Nelson's powerful and precocious use of English as the sole means by which he resiliently and quite brilliantly expressed a semblance of his incomprehensible beginnings. His symbolic constructions uncannily mirrored his existential crises and became his problem of learning. Nelson had trouble observing time, forming attachments to curricular objects, containing emotions, and ordering his thoughts in appropriate forms of discourse. He showed other signs of learning distress through his strange somatic behaviors. He gnawed on his fingers and pencil. He shouted at ghosts inside and outside of the classroom. He pleaded with fantasized demons to "get off him." Rather than punish, I took his words and returned to him new and gentler versions of his trouble. I realized that every wish to drive away others held a wish for them to never let him go. My careful response offered back to his repulsive language words that soothed a constant fear of being left behind. Nelson's constructions, so frightening to him and others, found in my vocabulary of belonging, softer forms of life that he began to trust. I was consistently hospitable to his relentless expressions of seething rage because the, at times, intolerable barrage of words and uncontrollable behaviors gave me insight into his shaking mental state.

From our symbolic interactions I learned that Nelson experienced, on a daily basis, inner conflicts that ruined his attempts to form a communicable and reliable self, which he needed to relate and be recognizable to others. I taught the children in my classroom that there was nothing to fear from Nelson's words as "they are 'just words' after all" (Farley 2012, 175). Words could hurt, I explained to their openly concerned faces, and at the same time, words were Nelson's only way to hold down and chase away his hurt. The children came to see that they were not the intended targets of the need to injure that lay behind Nelson's words. Following my very calm and contained lead, the children began to normalize Nelson's presence and his odd way of speaking his truth. As the year progressed, I became increasingly convinced that Nelson's strange use of language, which caused all of us so much grief, was the only thing keeping his fragile mind and existence afloat. He

needed an unfathomably defensive vocabulary to navigate the stormy social seas threatening to subsume a complicated existence.

A beginning teacher with little experience and no special education training, I drew my ideas on creatively supporting Nelson's language trouble directly from a literary education. I decided to use Nelson's highly literate capacity for symbolically waging the war within as a way to generate and renew the child's obvious intellectual brilliance and imaginative capacity. I followed the free-floating form of his affect and read Nelson's attempts to communicate as novel constructions. I received his words as a fabulous fiction of a wounded self not meant to harm others. I did not view Nelson's linguistic outbursts as a personal threat against his classmates and myself or against the educational enterprise, as did the indignant psychologist. I began to observe how his somewhat ironic, overdramatic, subversive, and vastly humorous usages of language offered me a sliver of insight into his highly charged mental state.

Out of my need for sheer survival as a beginning teacher, I created a literary method of reading the child's emotional state as he expressed it through what the psychologist documented as, "Nelson's bizarre use of language." Combining my training as both a scholar of English literature and a teacher of young children, I did not take Nelson at his word but at what I could feel driving his words: an unfathomable emotional content compelling him to verbally fend off anyone who tried to come close. I began to imaginatively feel my way into Nelson's unique way of expelling his ideas and the world as a guide to reading his unreadable insides. Some of the social justice education methods I had acquired as a pre-service student helped me spur Nelson's interest in various kinds of curriculum. But, it was my affective and literary analysis of the form and content in which his expressions arrived that offered me the most possibilities for teaching Nelson.

To this day, I am unsure of the long-term effect of my interventions on Nelson's development. As with many teachers' memories of students, the real child Nelson exists now as a fiction I create through the auspices of unreliable memory. Yet, in our pedagogical encounter I witnessed significant change in Nelson's responses to himself, to others in the classroom, and to his teachers. The psychologist and his parents discredited the interventions I stubbornly developed and used to support Nelson's literacy development, citing my lack of emotional distance, experience, and expertise. But they could not deny that my teaching, experimental as charged, affected a change in Nelson. I

observed Nelson using my words to briefly find moments of emotional balance. I witnessed him using interpretive and imaginative forms of language. I noticed how creative forms of language supported him to loosen his tight attachment to impoverished and demeaning vocabulary of images of himself offered to him by adults. I realized that the negative representations of Nelson authored by adults and teachers left him with no viable way to represent his inner life and impermissible lived experiences. Labels, categories, and disciplinary actions continued to hold him to account for a person that was not, in the first place, fashioned on his terms of existence. Finding relief in a story of existence that no longer resembled the one causing him no end to grief, Nelson clung to our co-constructed, emotionally rich, and open narrative of self. He grew less impulsive and defensive as he became more adept with interpreting and representing his ideas and thoughts to others. With his expanding vocabulary, he achieved moments of emotional and behavioral balance with others. From the new story of Nelson that we recreated together from what we imagined his insides were trying to say, Nelson gained some balanced insight into how to use words to express and manage the ravages of his inside life and precious mind.

My encounter with a child almost twenty years ago, when I was young and without children of my own, reminds me to take seriously a person's psychical life as fundamental for supporting his literacy. This child literally needed sympathetic words in the form of a caring and analytic vocabulary to attend to a daily experienced and inconsolable grief. Using the alter-existential vocabulary I offered, Nelson learned to read and write his painful inside life into a recognizable linguistic form that acknowledged his internal injuries. He needed a responsive and hospitable language: his existence and lifelong relation to others depended upon it. With my sustained literary attention to his broken symbolic formations, I was able to support Nelson's beginning capacity to read and write of a self that accorded to the internal map of language learning with which I imagined his mother had gifted him in infancy. The socializing forms of literacy offered to Nelson by his parents, school, and society were hostile to his primal need to acknowledge and respond to his terrible feelings of loss of primary people and places. Loss raging within expressed itself through his desperate need to articulate his truth. Using the symbolically reparative process of signifying and resignifying a ruined inside world, Nelson embarked on a relentless internal quest for justice in the wake of real and imagined injuries he suffered at the hands of somewhat merciless social begin-

nings. As a child of enormous privilege, Nelson wanted for nothing materially, and yet his insides remained impoverished by the discourses available to articulate his ruined existence. To have a chance to live a life with meaningful potential required interpretive openness and a literacy that responded to and represented his lived realities.

Lessons learned from Nelson sustained my literacy teaching with children and adults in the long term. I learned, much later during my doctorate and with some narcissistic shame, that my wild pedagogical experiments with the inner literate life of children was not my invention: child psychoanalysts in centuries past had developed multiple tried and tested methods for reading and analyzing the child's psychical literacy through her symptoms, silences, volatile behaviors, and cryptic words and deeds. Freud's observations on the founding children of psychoanalysis, his grandson Ernst and "Little Hans," opened the door to a new psychoanalytic field, child analysis. In this field, clues in the child's emotional expressions and behavioral responses came to present children's lives lived from the inside out. The child analyst's experimental orientation to reading the child's inner world appealed to my literary efforts to pedagogically intervene in the child's disturbing verbal and written expression.

When I first read of Melanie Klein's analytical efforts with a child named "Richard," I was overwhelmed with memories of Nelson. As with Nelson, Richard was wracked with deep fear and anxiety at the thought of threats to his existence. Troubled by the sights and sounds of World War II during the Blitz over the English countryside, Richard became uncommunicative. Their child's deep and unreachable distress compelled Richard's parents to seek help from Klein. Describing him as a "bright and precocious" child, Klein intuitively knew that Richard's inhibition with others could not be attributed to a mental or behavioral deficiency (Klein 1961, 15). Her carefully narrated analytic technique with Richard demonstrates Klein's commitment to supporting the child's well-being through language development. Her inventive interpretations of Richard's trouble, still subject to heated debate in the adult community of analysts, spoke to the child from the inside out.

To my great surprise, Klein preferred working with children exhibiting delays and disturbances with symbolic communication. She viewed behavioral difficulties in children as a problem of communication and traced its emotional path back to the child's infantile experiences with mother. She refused to deem emotionally disturbed children as behaviorally deviant, pathological, or abnormal, as is too

commonly the case in education. Instead, she used the word *inhibited* to describe children who routinely struggled to manage emotions and behavior. She attributed the child's struggles to an impaired capacity to express his need and/or self.

Resonating with Klein's deeply sympathetic and open orientation to the internal worlds of children, I was driven to read all of her cases. I discovered that my literary efforts to read the inside lives of children had a home in child psychoanalysis. In Klein's cases, I was given relief from pedagogical solitary confinement in a profession unable to bear a teacher's intuitive and emotional experimentation with the inner conflicts of children. My literary pedagogy with Nelson resounded in Klein's cases firmly equipped with a documented vocabulary mapping out the rocky royal road of the child's fictive inner life.

My faltering pedagogy, not quite psychoanalytic—I did not have the authority, language, or training—was aligned with the methods of child psychoanalysis. As in psychoanalysis, literacy of the Other attunes its ear to the child's insides. To pedagogically support a literacy of the Other, the teacher gains insight into the individual child's informal methods for language learning by engaging her emotional expressions. These aesthetic expressions hold insight into the complex workings of the child's internal life. From my work with children I find that early childhood literacy requires the teacher to engage the child's compulsion to symbolize as first and foremost an internal situation. I call the child's felt, internal situation waiting to be symbolically expressed *psychical literacy*. As I learned from Nelson, a pedagogy oriented to the child's inner world can support teachers to foster an interpretive response to her language triumphs and problems.

Klein's Object Relations: Psychical Literacy

Along with finding its inspiration in Nelson and other elementary school children who exhibit inhibitions with literacy, the psychological theory of literacy I advance in this book emerges from the work of Melanie Klein. An "indisputable figure" in psychoanalysis, Klein dedicated her life's work to supporting the child's inner sense of self through various interpretive forms of symbolic play and communication (Kristeva 2001, 6). Born in Vienna to assimilated Jews in 1882, and married with three children, Klein suffered bouts of debilitating depression throughout her life. In 1910 she began an analysis with Sandor Ferenczi, a key

figure in the psychoanalytic archive and close contemporary of Freud. Through these sessions, Ferenczi came to the conclusion that Klein had a “gift with children” (Kristeva 2001, 26). Ferenczi encouraged Klein to analyze her own children as the training ground for her theory and practice of child analysis. From Klein’s observations on and analysis of inhibited children emerged a technique for child analysis still used by clinicians and educators today.

Klein remains an unorthodox and controversial figure in psychoanalytic circles. Recently, in the fields of education and social theory, there is renewed interest in her ideas. Still, her conception of the infant-maternal relation has yet to find educational impact. Little scholarly attention continues to be afforded to the profound yet completely forgettable scene of maternal literacy (Grumet 1988). Throughout this book I return to Klein’s study of the internal mechanisms of infants as fundamental to one’s capacity to symbolically communicate one’s existence to others. These infantile mechanisms prepare the grounds for verbal literacy and its variants and support our subsequent sophisticated practices of symbolic communication. Radically, Klein’s theory of object relations reconstructs literacy development as vital to one’s chance to construct and narrate both one’s own humanity and that of others. Literacy’s role in subject formation expands the current view of literacy as merely an educational or cultural achievement necessary for human progress, societal participation, and/or material and economic well-being.

For Klein, natality marks one’s fall into a psychical condition imbued with meaning. Psychoanalyst Gregory Kohon describes the infant’s prelinguistic condition as already symbolically significant:

Even before the infant can understand language, before he has developed his capacity for linguistic expression (one could argue, even before his birth), he lives in a cultural milieu, which provides a context and extensive references to his existence. We are conceived, born, and exist in a world of others; it is these relationships that give meaning to our lives. These subjects are desiring subjects, who impose their own linguistic code on the newly arrived. The baby arrives to a meaningful world, marked and defined by language. . . . The baby falls into a world of significant others; mother, father, grandparents, with their own desires and their histories, their dreams and their own personal myths.

The baby is to discover that, prior to his birth, he has been existing in the minds of others; he has been given a name, has become part of a myth determined by others' desires. The world that welcomes him belongs to others; there will always be a considerable *plus* of signification that the baby will not be able to decode. (Kohon 2005, 46)

As Kohon indicates, the infant is meaning-full at birth. She is an absorbent, fleshy, sensate creature submerged in the sounds and sights of a foreign world filled to the brim with words that mean. The baby's first, fleeting, aural and tactile sense of the world outside the self resounds in the child's internal capacity to make sense, meaning, and interpretation of her lived condition. The *plus*, or excess of signification, to which Kohon refers is the unconscious and affective material structuring meaning that the baby takes in as she encounters objects from the external world. The (m)other's desire for the baby is imprinted in language and begins to "make" of the baby what it will in the name of culture, religion, and the nation. The excesses of signification traced in the first narrative of baby given to her by others are deposited into the baby's unconscious. These unconscious affects support one's lifelong mental functioning and well-being.

Klein's oeuvre acknowledges the profound role of maternity in the mental and symbolic development of the child. Taking in sounds and gestures, the infant is unequipped to speak at birth. Without the benefit of intelligible spoken language, the infant's capacity for communication consists of her flaying efforts to wordlessly express to mother a total sense of an internally felt existence. Communication might seem next to impossible for the nonverbal tiny human. And yet, as Klein convincingly argues, the infant's prelingual state does not dissuade her compulsion to communicate with mother. In infancy, communication with mother consists of a mysterious communion of inside lives conveyed mostly through feeling. Relying completely on internally felt impressions, the infant expresses her overwhelming need to mother who must then interpret these expressions and respond well to her unspeakable situation. The child's first somatic efforts to communicate to mother are animated in this unconscious, mute, immemorial time of infant-mother communion.

The infant's compulsion to symbolize begins at birth with her fragile efforts to communicate to others a sense of dire need.² Without words, and clinging to the mother's care, the infant is nonetheless

incredibly capable of intracommunication that belies empirical determinations of human thought and language. Upon birth the infant gives a sense of her instinct to survive through her first gasps, cries, and grunts. Felt expressions of need activate the child's innate capacities for sense making. In turn, the pressing need to communicate drives the infant's first "phantastic" capacity to "mentalize" and express her felt reality to mother.

Klein claims the baby's need to express her mental state coincides with the first feeding experience: "I found that object relations start almost at birth and arise with the first feeding experience; furthermore, that all aspects of mental life are bound up with object relations" (Klein 1955, 52). She (1928) identified the breast as the first object to which the baby is indelibly attached. Kristeva suggests that the infant's sensational drive to the breast conjures a phantastic mental state, which forms the basis of her mental life.

The *sensation of a drive* in the psychic apparatus is automatically associated with the fantasy of an *object* that is appropriated to it, with each incitement of the drives having its own corresponding fantasy (the desire for food, for example, is associated with the affect of hunger and the breast object). From the moment of birth, the drive engages in a binary expression: sensation/affect and the object both *co-exist*, and the presentation of the object clings to sensation. The Kleinian phantasy is the mechanism of this juncture, of the drives' destiny to be both inside and outside: it is an "object-seeking" drive. (Kristeva 2001, 141–42)

Through phantasy,³ the baby associates the drive to a corresponding mental status of the object whose character is felt, imagined, and expressed. The internal sensation conflated with the actual mother's breast is psychically managed, deposited, and traced in the unconscious. Mentally taking in (introjection) and putting out (projection) objects/breast initiates the infant's first visually mental efforts for making sense. She expresses these sensations through unintelligible symbolic forms such as crying, screaming, gurgling, or sighing. The mentally experienced feeding event parallels the actual phenomenon of taking in sustenance. The two processes, psychical and social, only partially correspond and easily set each other off track and into opposition. In phantasy, it is as if the baby, completely from within, is put

upon to manage and operate within two parallel universes competing for the infant's attention and desire.

Internally making relations to the mother's breast gives the child her first felt, hostile, and gratifying experience of the external world. Her need of others animates feelings of terror, persecution, grief, and gratitude toward those entrusted with her care. In turn, these feelings build up and lay down the infant's psyche:

The object-world of the child in the first two or three months of its life could be described as consisting of hostile and persecuting, or else of gratifying parts and portions of the real world. Before long the child perceives more and more of the whole person of the mother, and this more realistic perception extends to the whole world beyond the mother. The fact that a good relation to its mother and to the external world helps the baby to overcome its early paranoid anxieties throws a new light on the importance of its earliest experiences. (Klein 1935, 141)

This fraught stage of mental development consists of the infant's internal breakdown of total objects into good and bad to gain control over the sensations the objects present. Through this process of disintegration of objects the baby is given the capacity to mentalize more manageable bits and pieces of perceptions of external reality. These bits and pieces are integrated as a form of infantile sense making. The communal process by which the baby learns to internalize and project external objects forms the basis for her symbolic capacity to make sense of people and things. As she begins to discern between feeling and object, the baby stabilizes her fraught relation to mother. Before long, the baby integrates her feelings for the mother as a whole person rather than in bits and pieces of love and hate.

The precariousness of infancy and mental development relies on how well the infant manages and makes sense of the all-encompassing bits of part objects and people with and without the other's support. Accordingly, the mother plays a fundamental role in laying down the meaning-making system in the infant. The mother's response to the infant's fragile and repeated attempts to communicate her split sense of her self supports the baby's unique way of managing, ordering, and integrating internally felt sensations and objects.

Even when the baby begins to discern the mother as a whole person, split feeling conveying the baby's need for her qualifies the infant's first sense of the world. Babies cry all the time to convey grief at their existential condition of total dependence on others and objects. When we interpret the baby's communication as sad, we mistake the infant's prelinguistic grief for an emotion that is not yet a distinct symbol with a moral orientation. Infantile grief is not sad, mad, or bad. Grief instead supports an emerging, complex, and phantastic mental state. Prelingual grief contains a vast set of splitting meanings that reach beyond a simple emotional signification such as sad.

For the baby, the object becomes subject to her feeling for it, and feeling is both fickle and fleeting. Within seconds, the object world can fantastically go from feeling good to feeling bad for the baby. These sharp fluctuations of the infant's split mental state greatly impact on the mother's effort to locate the source of the infant's distress. The mother's "body reading" of infantile expression can become confused and confuse and is prone to misreading (Grumet 1988). Unable to gauge or attend to what she thinks the infant needs, the mother can regress into her own infancy. With the infantile regression, the mother also experiences splitting and unspeakable forms of grief. She can also mistake pleasure for pain and pain for pleasure. During this overwhelming, confused, perpetually in crisis activity of splitting correspondence between self, sensations, and object/other, the inner world is built up as the infant's mechanism for integrating sense is laid down. As the mother begins to carefully and consistently respond to the baby's need, the baby's split sense of herself becomes more balanced and more readily able to take in new people and things.

These first sets of wild and devastating misreadings taking place between infant and mother in the infantile scene is unconsciously transferred to the child's subsequent readings of objects, others, and the world. The anxious and explicitly grief-stricken efforts to make psychical relation to each other lay down and build up an interperceptive apparatus upon which the child will build her evolving co-authored interpretive capacities. This infantile register supports one, across a lifetime, to read the world according to unconscious and prior experiences of her self.

Profound, felt, and phantastic communication between mother and infant comprise the internal activities of psychical literacy. Kristeva (2001) deems this communication semiotic, likening it to Plato's *chora*,

a collaborative and fictive communication with (m)other emitted in rhythms, tones, inflection, and murmuring. The communication is also sensual; we speak with eyes against eyes, breath against eyelash, skin against skin, mouth against nipple. We gain a sense of the unbearable qualities of this kind of communication when, as adults, we feel split apart, when aggression and feelings of hate emerge, when meaning breaks down and we are unable to find words to express our trouble.

In his writing on the not known of thinking, Derrida (1976a) characterizes this form of infantile communication as arche-writing. Arche writing refers to the bare trace of unconscious drives and desires left behind in the linguistic structure we use to piece together existential thoughts of ourselves and others. As philosophical thought is consumed with thoughts of existence, it is most prone to infantile feelings. Arche-writing, Derrida insists, precedes existential writing because, "It is that very thing that cannot let itself be reduced to the form of presence" (1976a, 57). The term *arche* suggests an originary source for writing that is necessary or involved in the practice of making symbolic meaning. Arche-writing resembles psychical literacy, although Derrida himself only refers to this writing in terms of the trace it leaves behind, "not only in the form and substance of graphic expression but also in those of nongraphic expression" (ibid., 60). In his conception of trace, Derrida's conception of arche-writing in philosophy uncannily resembles Klein's theory of psychical literacy. Both Derrida and Klein suggest that psychical traces of formative others drive one's symbolic expressions and interpretations of others.⁴ And as Derrida finds in his deconstruction of the great metaphysical texts, traces of a thinker's thoughts can resemble the stuff of Kleinian phantasy.

In stark contrast to the dependent structure of existence driving psychical literacy, the symbolic order is primarily used to privilege the self over others. Speaking gives way to naming. Naming alienates mother and child. The violent opposing of self and other is instituted upon the child's aural and oral determination that she is "I" and mother is "other than I."⁵ But this sovereignty that language institutes is illusory. In Western thought, Lévinas (1969) writes, "I" as sovereign Self is overdetermined to the point that man mythically believes himself to be omnipotent and with no need for others. This idea is fundamentally misleading because, as Klein insists, human subjectivity is continuously forming in response to our need of (m)others. The maternal relation evidences this dependent structure of human existence. Although the

first scene of reading is foreclosed in the child's learning to speak and then read and write print, it never leaves. Each time we struggle to make meaning we are reminded of infantile need. Our need of the other is embedded in the formation of the self even while language (of self) gives us the illusion of separateness, of sovereignty.

Klein's theory of object relations is critical to my reconstruction of literacy because it situates meaning making in the (m)other rather than the word. The (m)other is there before I am. She receives me into a world of words. Meaning making in this earliest human relation stresses the bodily felt and articulated co-constructed experience of language learning. Object relations ground the formation of human thought in preconscious mental activity. This mental activity is experienced first in the body in the mouth, skin/nipple, and ear. Rather than attribute our first meaning-making experiences to our entry into the patriarchal symbolic order, Klein's theory suggests that our need of others gives way to our expressive capacity to wordlessly communicate ourselves to others. This capacity, this mysterious internal intelligence, gives way to "wording," to language learning (Bollas 1999).

Klein is reluctant to equate literacy with the empire and empiricism of speaking. Instead, she looks to affect, gesture, emotion, expression, idiom, outburst as guides to words that contain the child's infantile impressions of formative people and things. These internalized impressions are traced in the words that the child uses to express an existential sense of herself to others. The child's need of words is as sweet nourishment and bitter milk (Grumet 1988). Words imbued with felt meanings feed her capacity to elaborate upon an incredible existential sense of self and other in spectacular, fantastic, and symbolic forms of knowledge, art, culture, and civilization. As we become schooled in literacy, poet Shel Silverstein laments, we forget the inner language of communion with others needed to speak to unspeakable things inside ourselves. His poem "Forgotten Language" poignantly recalls the child's capacity to "speak the language of the flowers" and "understand each word the caterpillar said" (Silverstein 1974, 149). The infant-child's inner capacity to commune with the insides of speaking and nonspeaking others forms the basis of the psychical life of literacy; a trace of its unconscious activity stirs in the child's unique idiom and expression that accompany her through a lifelong relationship through language. We can never quite let go of our capacities to phantasize and feel the insides of the world out.

I stumbled on the incredible resource of the child's inner life when attempting to support the literacy development of Nelson. In my teaching of young children, I was often moved to think again when confronted with their fantastic uses of symbolic constructions. I strained to hear the yearning and mournful communication behind a child's affect-driven words. Using literary training, I read the force of feeling behind the child's tremendous efforts to communicate. Fictive readings of the child's inner life can move us to imagine an earlier time when words were hard and we had few resources for speaking of our felt human condition. Communing with the child's spectacular fantastic insides supports her to develop and contain emotionally wrought processes of symbolization.

At and after birth the infant is subject to a number of intense experiences that are laden with the mother's power, symbolism, and significance taken in and projected out by the baby. Infancy provides the child with a chance to become both herself and other than herself. How she negotiates competing demands to exist depends on the adult reception of her body in a world premade with meanings and significations. The literate means and modes by which the mother pedagogically brings the infant precariously into a world of words is critical to her subject formation. Throughout this book, I demonstrate how Nelson's psychically fragmented questions of self, other and world, history, justice and repair fueling his symbolic constructions vividly appear in the psychic life of children's literacy, the writings of Klein and Derrida, and literature that grapples with the mysteries of existence. In the next chapter, I will suggest that the infant's forgotten language has a markedly literary quality. I look to literature to develop further the idea of fictive reading as gaining the capacity to feel for or follow the fragile lines of the other's mental efforts to communicate a sense of herself to others. Readers, teachers, and scholars can develop this capacity to feel one's way through text with support of psychoanalytic constructs mapping out the emotional life. Engaging our felt readings of literature can tentatively open up an imaginative mode of affectively reading the world and others. Reading with feeling might support us to carefully re-narrate the fictional forms of knowledge by which we stake claims to the world and others. We might then begin to recognize the immense existential significance of the (m)other's literacy that forms the facts of our social condition as it provides fictive conditions for social life.