CHAPTER FIVE
LANGUAGE AND THE ARTS

As we have indicated in Chapter Four, there are many areas of research in neuroscience which underpin the ways in which people interact with and make meaning of literary narratives. Our argument so far is current and urgent but also traditional. It is current and urgent because the reading brain is threatened by the digital age, but it is traditional because for a long time scholars from a variety of disciplines have insisted that language is the fundamental marker separating human beings from all other species. Our argument privileges linguistic narrative—stories and natural language—more than other cultural inventions. The human ability to tell stories and to invent and participate in a complex language system makes humans different than other animals. Language allows humans to be self-reflective, the argument goes, providing them with a unique opportunity to create human meaning and to locate themselves in the world.

The bedrock foundation for human society is, by this reasoning, language. John Russo, for example, is clearly thinking along these lines when he claims: “Complex literary language penetrates the imagistic surfaces, probes into the furthest recesses of mind and feeling, breaks the force of habit, and draws patterns of coherence in order to deepen and empower a self-determining, continuously developing selfhood” (Russo, 2005, p. 35). For Russo, as for us, language is close to the origins of human consciousness. We consider language to be at the heart of the best learning; no other medium holds such potentialities for the reader and learner.

Dewey (1899/2009), in his description of what is needed for a child’s education, captures this idea most succinctly:

What is needed, in a word, is to afford occasion by which the child is moved to educe and exchange with others his store of experiences, his range of information, to make new observations correcting and extending them in order to keep his images moving, in order to find mental rest and satisfaction in definite and vivid realization of what is new and enlarging. (Dewey, 2009, p. 82)
Our argument has been right along that literary narrative offers what Dewey called for in the classroom ("What is needed ... is to afford occasion by which the child is moved to educe and exchange with others his store of experiences ... "). The best literacy learning requires direct student-to-student interaction, a genuine educational "exchange." Although other mediums, like music, dance, and film, may inspire people and help illuminate human meaning, no other medium can replace the literary text in terms of complexity and what it can offer experientially to the learner for developing and understanding the self.

THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE SHAKEN

We acknowledge that this belief in the unique power of language to enrich the human self and community has recently been shaken from a number of angles and for a variety of complex reasons, both theoretical and practical. For example, although it is generally agreed that speaking and listening have a strong biological basis in terms of human evolution, while reading and writing appear to be cultural in origin, the idea that spoken language, once established, developed and expanded for social and cultural reasons into writing systems is these days open to heated debate. This debate was first highlighted by the work of Jacques Derrida in *Writing Difference* (Derrida, 1978). Such a debate raises interesting and problematic questions about the relationship between speech and writing, and about the phonological and visual features of various writing systems, their graphic shapes and orthographic patterns of sound-spelling correspondences. It also leads to other intriguing questions, such as: does speech actually precede writing? Is it possible to imagine that writing precedes speech? Did writing actually develop to expand spoken language? Coulmas (1989), for example, maintains that writing began as recordings of events and transactions, and only later served as a way of recording speech. These questions, and many others, no doubt contribute to the current complexities involved in determining the importance of language and for understanding the origins of human consciousness itself.

For us, the dialogic nature of language and human consciousness, as well as of speech and writing, seems crucial and correct in its broad outlines. As Vygotsky (1986) has claimed: "Thought development is determined by language, i.e., by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experience of the child" (p. 94). Our own experience in the classroom supports this view. Deep reading and the potentialities for engaged