

Cultural Value

Assessing the intrinsic value
of The Reader Organisation's
Shared Reading Scheme





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A Report from the Centre for Research into Reading,
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Background

The Reader Organisation (TRO) and Get into Reading (GiR)

The Reader Organisation's mission is to create environments where personal responses to books are freely shared in reading communities in every area of life. Beginning life as a small outreach unit at the University of Liverpool in 1997, TRO was established as a national charity in 2008 and has pioneered the weekly 'read aloud' model at the heart of its Get into Reading Project (GiR), now known as Shared Reading. The GiR model is based on small groups (2–12 people), formed to read aloud together short stories, novels and poetry. The Reader currently has 70 full-time employees and delivers over 360 groups, in a range of health and social care settings (community centres, libraries, homeless shelters, schools, hospitals, offices, doctors' surgeries, prisons, drug rehab units and care homes) across the UK, with an annual turnover of £2.1 million, 70% of which is generated by commissions from health authorities etc.

Calderstones Park Mansion

The acquisition of this grade 2 listed building, built in 1828, is central to TRO's effort to create a demonstrably new environment for social community. Previously not open to the public for forty years, Calderstones Mansion is set in 94 acres of public parkland in Liverpool, including sports facilities and a set of Neolithic (calder) stones of very significant archaeological interest. Supported by the Liverpool City Council, TRO has taken over the building and outhouses, with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, to establish an International Centre for Reading and Wellbeing. The project, which commenced in August 2013 seeks to provide an exemplary practical model of new social provision (including gardening, café, health care, sport, drama and music facilities, carers' residential weekends etc) uniquely centred around reading activity. Its aim is to serve as a future Merseyside hub to create a substantial body of volunteers engaged in a wide range of reader and other-related activities, serving both the local and the wider Liverpool community, and with relation also to its long-standing partner, Mersey Care NHS Trust.

Primary Aims of the Project

- To identify the intrinsic value components of the reading aloud shared-reading model as a specific participatory and voluntary experience, in creation of both individual meaningfulness and a strongly interactive small community
- To examine the relationship of this intrinsic value to (arguably) collateral and secondary (therapeutic, health, economic, social) benefits

The Experiment

Texts for shared reading sessions were taken from TRO's resource bank of tried and tested texts from serious literature of different ages (usually a short story or excerpt from a novel followed by a related short poem), anthologised in *A Little Aloud*, edited by Angela Macmillan (Chatto and Windus 2010). Get into Reading is a read-aloud model but, as is its practice, printed copies of the text are simultaneously held by each.

We ran a 12-week cross-over design to compare and contrast the 'intrinsic' experience associated with GiR with Built Environment groups (BE) exploring the design of the park area around the new International Centre for Reading and Wellbeing, at Calderstones Mansion. Measures of mental health and wellbeing benefits were included, ahead of whether benefits were to be deemed 'instrumental' or not. Though the Built Environment Workshop was offered for purposes of potential contrast, it was also chosen for offering its own intrinsic value in the same site and area of activity.

FOR QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS:

- Self-report measures of health and wellbeing were used before and after each six-week period

FOR QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS:

- Group sessions were audio and video recorded: the language was transcribed and innovatively analysed by the interdisciplinary team of linguists, psychologists and literary specialists.
- Video-assisted interviews with individual participants were then audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed. These were often qualitatively deeper than conventional interviews because interviewees were given opportunity to see themselves recorded in action in the group.
- To complete the circle, one of the authors of the texts used in the study, Joanne Harris, was also shown excerpts from a group reading of her own work and interviewed. (She commented on how 'rare and pleasing' it was for an author actually to be able to witness 'spontaneous and real reader responses'.)
- Reading-group members currently employed by or volunteering with The Reader Organisation were also interviewed, to give their own extended experience.

Funding

The study was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council on 'Cultural Value' and approved by University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee.

The Full Report

What follows is an abbreviation of the full report (which also includes sections on the Built Environment workshops with which GiR is compared, the experience of volunteers in TRO outside the reading groups, and more detailed linguistic analyses): it is available on http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/instituteofpsychology/deptpsychologicalsciences/AHRC_Cultural_Value_Report.pdf and is best supplemented by the evidence of the video excerpts.



Summary Findings from Self-Report Quantitative Measures

1

By using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) to collect data on current affective states immediately following each session, we could demonstrate a consistent and statistically significant tendency for involvement in *both* activities to be associated with the self-report of more positive than negative affect. There is some evidence in our data to suggest that GiR involvement prompts the tolerated experience of negative affect to a greater extent than BE does. This would be consistent with some of the intrinsic value of the shared reading of literature lying in its capacity to open up individuals to experience a broader range of emotional states. It is possible that these states may be experienced vicariously in response to character in the texts. They may also be associated with personal episodes or re-appraised situations from the past that are brought to mind, possibly as analogous situations or events, in response to the texts. It is also consistent with the idea that the description of emotions in polar terms (negative/positive) is questionable or unhelpful in relation to the value of this intervention. Because of the requirement that interventions should 'do no harm', it is important to emphasise that no evidence points to GiR having any deleterious effects, even in expanding the experience of supposed 'negative' emotions.

2

We asked participants to write down 2 words or phrases that expressed their experience of each session. Evidence from the '2 words' data demonstrates the different nature of the responses generated within our participants following involvement in the sessions. BE sessions were dominated by cognitive as opposed to affective responses in relation to skills and attitudes involved in collectively creating a future improvement in social environment (e.g. 'knotty', 'development', 'anticipating', 'positive', 'co-operative') whereas GiR activated more powerfully emotional descriptors but in a finer balance of affective and cognitive responses (e.g. 'warmth', 'reflection', 'memory', 'moved', 'open').

3

The comprehensive Ryff scale of Psychological Wellbeing, tested against others (WEMWBS, Delgard scale, Depression and Anxiety Scale), was most sensitive and appropriate for this model. There is some evidence in our data to suggest the 2 activities promote different aspects of specific psychological wellbeing. The strongest findings in this regard are in relation to shared reading where *purpose in life* improved for both groups after 6 weeks of GiR. Furthermore, the data indicates that for Group A who experienced GiR followed by BE, the rise in purpose in life from baseline to week 6 was eradicated by week 12 following involvement in BE. The statistically significant and trend level findings were associated with medium to very strong effect sizes.

These findings demonstrate that shared reading can have beneficial outcomes in terms of re-invigorating *sense of purpose* and improving *an individual's sense of value and meaning in life* (past and present), making active contribution possible. This finding is of particular significance for those who are low in wellbeing (languishing) or suffering from mild to moderate depression. There is some evidence to suggest BE involvement may have impact upon psychological wellbeing by improving sense of *personal growth through increased self-development as a result of knowledge acquisition*. These differentiated benefits seem *intrinsic* to the different nature of the two kinds of group activity and are not limited to medicalised problems or cases.

Qualitative Analysis of Get Into Reading Groups

Five Intrinsic Elements of the Experience

1

Liveness

In contrast to the custom in traditional reading groups, literary texts are read aloud (several times) within the reading groups rather than known or read in advance. The liveness of delivery is characteristically matched by a liveness from group-participants in response.

Key characteristics of this vitality are as follows:

- **Literature a Centre for the Group** because the text is a vocally embodied presence

I was interested in our body language. At the time I did feel engaged in it, but I hadn't realised how much, till I saw us leaning in to it if you like. It was as though there was a power in the middle of the table, or around [the Group Leader] maybe as she was facilitating, and it was pulling us in.

(Participant S, interview)

Participants reported feelings of enjoyment, pleasure, immersion, emotional engagement, safety, and ease even whilst making efforts.

- **Absorption/immersion**

Participant An spoke in interview of how, at its best, 'each moment became totally a world in itself for appreciation'. This involves not so much talking together 'about' an issue but talking together 'within' an area.

Researchers in Linguistics made preliminary investigations into linguistic features (e.g. mobility in use and shift of pronouns: I, you, we; deixis/phrases that bespeak pointing) showing traces of this sense of the group working internally, within its own terms, in live relation to the text.

- **Not knowing in advance**

A further consequence of this performative method of delivery was described by participant An in subsequent interview:

I went in there, not knowing; I didn't know I was going to come across that. When you read a text, your own experience comes into reading that text, and you identify different parts, and that is what a lot of literature is... I was totally taken aback and it felt so important both on emotional level and also intellectual level... and I felt it mattered and should be pursued, by myself because my own response was so great.

Reading in this model is a form of immediate *doing*, rather than solitary interpretation in measured retrospect. It involves not only tolerating but also excitedly employing what might be called uncertainty. *Unpredictability* – and an awareness of unpredictability – may be the better formulation here. From the perspective of a psychologist, Professor Corcoran summarises this alternative to simple norms or easy defaults:

In general it is thought that the human brain is set up as a prediction/Bayesian system to reduce uncertainty. This helps us improve how we manage and govern our lives easily, conveniently and with least effort – hence we like to reason by analogy and live by routines. The live reading of unknown texts with (unknown) others removes the facility to rely on this evolved 'safe system' so readily. In these circumstances we cannot predict and so cannot control our responses – instead we react in emotional ways where the function of emotions is to prepare an organism to act in response to environmental challenges, potentially dangerous or novel situations.

- **Triggered aliveness of response**

The experience is of thoughts 'coming to mind' in the act of speaking, of new thoughts opened up out of old material which is not exhausted or repetitively familiar but seen and felt anew from a different perspective. These thoughts, as experiences, include an accompanying affect and other related sensations felt in a new context. The sudden triggering takes the recollection out of its original context in the reader and lands it somewhere else (within the poem or story), requiring him or her to re-think the meaning and significance of it. This experience is true of some of the best moments in the reading group. Where a reader's personal response seems called for, there is often for the respondent a sense of a matched relation to the world envisioned by the text – as though the thought was not gratuitous but fitting. One interviewee amongst the apprentices at TRO said it was like 'coming out' from inside, and finding 'a place' for a thought.

- **Sense of achievement in reading aloud**

This sense of active participation and careful mastery, deeper than the gain in self-confidence it also includes, is felt by group-members when, not having read previously, they do decide to volunteer to read a section of a passage. In his fourth session, participant D read Robert Herrick's seventeenth-century love poem 'To Anthea, Who May Command Him Anything' haltingly but with quiet care. Participant J described D's reading aloud later in the session itself:

It's got so much strength in the claims, that it doesn't want too much emphasis in the speaking it just wants a quiet delivery because the words do all the work... I mean you read it extremely well... it's like a deadpan, no that is not quite the right word: the deadpan nature of the statement is you know offset by the incredible commitments being made in every verse.

Further investigation of existing data will be able to show statistically the increased contribution of participants who have read aloud for the first time both immediately after reading and in subsequent sessions. Selected transcripts of individual participant contribution as developing across sessions are also available for further quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Five Intrinsic Elements of the Experience

2

Creative Inarticulacy:

unpredictability and emergent thinking

This characteristic, in the struggle for live formulation, occurs in contrast to the norms of pre-programming: i.e. the speech patterns associated with the untroubled register of information and opinion. The consequence, as a result of blocking simple facility and glib literalistic opinion, was actually an increase in what the novelist Joanne Harris (viewing excerpts from the reading of her own story) described as 'emotional articulacy'. As a London project worker put it in interview: 'You can see it, you can feel it as a facilitator, so, you know, you can see the *birth* of it as you're reading.'

Where the Built Environment has clear implicit criteria of *relevance* to the practical design-task in hand, the reading group worked more within what might be called a field of *resonance* radiating from the poem or story: i.e. the circle of feeling within which the work remained live. The literary experience is intrinsic or, as we shall also say, *implicit*: the meaning is not readily offered in advance in terms of titles, cases or cures; it is invariably *more* than any paraphrase or categorisation can hold and is emergent from below upwards; and it is internally generated within the group through clues, triggers and the working at meaning. This is in marked contrast to the procedures of self-help books, for example, where the subject-matter is named and the procedure is *explicitly top-down*, in terms of useful information, explanation, programme, stages of treatment etc. A comparison of the effect of the actual content used in reading groups (literature compared to self-help books or newspapers) is a matter for further research.

In interview participant E who suffers from a neurological disability talks of her extended sense of the difficulty of 'putting thoughts into words which you haven't been able to put into words, or to explain':

*I mean that's one of the things that I find that when I'm trying to put thoughts into words to then explain to doctors, it's an **impossible**, unless I've... sometimes I find something written down and think, that's what I'm trying to explain! Sometimes I don't, you know... Because unless you find the right words, they don't understand what you're talking about. And sometimes when you read a poem or a story or whatever, you read it and you're thinking that writer has just hit the nail on the head, and you know, I know exactly what he's talking about.*

Language analyses – some examples

In the transcripts a much-repeated locution unconsciously adopted by participants of different social background and educational experience is the phrase 'it is as though' or 'it's almost as if' or 'it is almost like' or 'I feel as though'. It is commonly the prelude or bridge to a bold and interesting breakthrough in thought (as opposed to the tonal opinionatedness of, say, 'I just/still think'). Arising out of an uncertainty or hesitation that is nonetheless far from disabling, it is a tool that allows time, space and permission for tentative, imaginative thinking, close to the intrinsic spirit of literary thinking itself.

Example 1:

At moments of greatest achievement, the group (suddenly less dependent on the Group Leader) seems to be passing the baton, as it were, from member to member, in what we call a *relay* of thinking. Each member helps to complete or develop the thought and the group begins to act like a single mind, with diverse thoughts in its different inter-relating people collaborating around the poem. So in a session on John Clare's poem of mental turmoil, 'I Am', ending thus:

I long for scenes where man has never trod,
A place where woman never smiled or wept,
There to abide, with my creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

A: It feels, there's something about peace isn't there, because it's not even talking about being happy. It's just: doesn't smile or wept; it's about peacefulness and to be untroubled.

H: Yes, it's almost like he wants like freedom from mental turmoil or something like that, you know just to not kind of cause anyone any trouble or feel anything horrible or anything like that.

J: Escaping the world, in a sense isn't it. With a sense of obviously in this case a religious space, heaven.

Group Leader: It's funny though that it doesn't say heaven...

C: It's almost as if the everyday life, almost he's thinking that is what he may interpret as paradise.

Group Leader: Yes, yes

C: You know the people everyday, or it's almost as if people are untouched by illness, grief, happiness. It's...

A: 'I long for':... Is it almost like daring to hope? Because I was thinking that, I was thinking is there hope in longing but sometimes there is.'

John Clare I Am

I am – yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes –
They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,
Like shadows in love-frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am, and live – like vapours tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
Even the dearest that I love the best
Are strange – nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below – above, the vaulted sky.

There is in this group-work a strong sense of the creative effort to translate an inner experience to an outer world. It makes explicit what is deeply *personal* and not easy or even necessary to communicate. Yet the communication is part of what it means to be of a *social* species, identifying matches, friends, confidantes.

Further analysis is needed of those moments when people pause or even stop without quite finishing their sentence, where the effect is more of a full silence than an empty one; or where an emergent live thought seems not so much blocked as continuing to exist suggestively and unspoken in the resonant atmosphere of the group without a ready-made category or framework heading for continuance. The full silence is where implicit meaning still seems present: an empty silence often makes more demands on the Group Leader to break it. We made statistical comparison between the two different groups working on the same passage from *Great Expectations* in another session: the Group Leader's sense of there being more empty silence in group 2 was reflected in her taking up 57% of the word-count in that group, compared to 42% in group 1.

Example 2:

In the reading groups the creative inarticulacy and uncertainty involved in not being clear about where a thought was going summons a vocabulary other than labelling, has impact upon syntax, and affects the imagined understanding of time itself. Thus, for example, E talking in the group on *Silas Marner*:

I think sometimes if you've lost something, be it for example this character losing his money, or even like it might be a drastic change, for example you're retiring and suddenly your life's different, it's wondering what – it's a future that you don't know. In the past the future's always been – there.

'Wondering what ...' is a properly uncompleted and non-naming locution. This felt inward sense of imaginatively new or unclear possibilities struggling for articulation is part of the *intrinsic* nature of a *literary* reading group in the way that the psychologist/philosopher Eugene Gendlin suggests in his own sense of 'implicit' meaning involved in the literary 'coming of words':

*'Say you are writing a poem. You have six or eight lines but the poem is not finished. It wants to go on. In an implicit way you feel what should be said next, but you do not know what to say. The phrases that do come do not precisely say it. You reject one phrase after another. How are you able to do this? ... Something implicit is functioning in your rejection of them.'*¹

The language and syntax of the group participants is often inflected by the work being read. Creative inarticulacy makes the expression of a sentence a genuine achievement just as it is in the act of writing itself.

1. 'The New Phenomenology of Carrying Forward' (p. 131) http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2228.html



Five Intrinsic Elements of the Experience

3

The Emotional

Participant E said at interview: *When you're reading a well-written, powerful poem, it sort of hits you in the face even though it physically can't. Participant A said: I think poetry can get to feelings very quickly – it's almost condensed [...] It just happened quite – suddenly.*

Certain kinds of knowledge and articulate education were seen as secondary. M at interview compared the Built Environment group from his own point of view, in relation to what, though difficult, was best for his self-reported depression:

M: *It [BE] does let you off the hook in a sense: learning doesn't engage you on an emotional level that much, like literature. If you go and learn a language for instance, and take language classes, then it more like an escape.*

Interviewer: *So what is learning in the reading groups?*

M: *It is sharing things about life, it is not a theoretical discussion.*

L said at interview:

When I was in London I spent years and years and years going to see this therapist to try and sort of you know work it all out. And she always used to say, 'That's the sociological defence' whenever she thought I wasn't speaking from me – I'm obsessed with context - trying to place people's personal experience in the context in which they experience them.

The importance of the emotion

The starting point for what we have called 'doing reading', actively and dynamically in the moment, was a felt inner experience, implicitly registered in response to the text. This was not necessarily a single nameable emotion (as in 'the poem is about sadness') but more a felt and often adjectival sense of the poem (signalled initially by shorthand deictic phrases such as 'It's sad', 'This is tender') out of which more complex explicit thoughts would later emerge and open.

Without that initial resonance of felt sense, the group was hard to set going, and the silences felt empty or awkward with the space between group members feeling large (as the Group Leader often confirmed). Feeling, as a form of incipient thinking struggling for articulation, was the primary experience without

which in the first place, nothing to felt purpose followed in the second. It was important that to avoid betraying itself by default opinionatedness, the mind of the participant was tuned in and in place: that is to say, in touch with resonant areas of deep and real human experience otherwise difficult to locate, recover or talk about but delivered by the literary text.

This makes for a different sort of group-experience of emotions – for example:

Interviewer: *And one thing I wish to ask is how does talking about emotion in the reading group feel different – or connecting emotionally in the reading group feel different to the kinds of groups you've been in before. Unusually for someone your age, you've been in a lot of situations like that.*
H: *Yes, it's less... miserable, I suppose. You know, you're not sitting around talking about how you feel terrible, everything's going wrong, you know, you're sitting round talking about [long pause] not always good things but things...in a better context. Does that make sense?... You're kind of looking at them, you're not feeling them yourself necessarily, or not on the same level as I would have been in hospital... I can look at the poem and think about **what it means to feel that.***

Wordsworth (*The Prelude*, 1850 version, 13. 246–8) speaks of 'sorrow, that is not sorrow, but delight;/And miserable love, that is not pain/To hear of'. The reading group is not all about the discussion of 'problems'. But where (as so often in literature) there is in the text a felt sense of human trouble, what had seemed to the participant a *negative* problem in his or her self becomes a subject-matter in another as depicted within a poem or story, to be engaged in from a different level. That different level offers active, transmuted use of what previously may have seemed passive, painful or shameful material. Literature provides just such a perspective of a widened and deeper spectrum of human norms. The perspective-change is a development upon which this research team would wish to carry out further analysis in future comparative work.



Robert Herrick To Anthea,

Who May Command Him Anything

Bid me to live, and I will live
Thy Protestant to be:
Or bid me love, and I will give
A loving heart to thee.

A heart as soft, a heart as kind,
A heart as sound and free
As in the whole world thou canst find,
That heart I'll give to thee.

Bid that heart stay, and it will stay
To honour thy decree:
Or bid it languish quite away,
And 't shall do so for thee.

Bid me to weep, and I will weep
While I have eyes to see:
And, having none, yet I will keep
A heart to weep for thee.

Bid me despair, and I'll despair,
Under that cypress tree:
Or bid me die, and I will dare
E'en death to die for thee.

Thou art my life, my love, my heart,
The very eyes of me,
And hast command of every part,
To live and die for thee.

Attention

It is to be noted that this emotional impact need not be, and characteristically was not, separable from subsequently precise and close imaginative *attention* to the vocally embodied work as also seen on the page. In relation to the Herrick poem, E (with no formal experience of studying literature since school) saw how important sonically was the poem's repeated use of the mid-line comma ('Bid me to live, and I will live', 'Bid me to weep, and I will weep') in making the lover's pledge freely rather than automatically given. As a result of an accident with electrical equipment, E is particularly sensitive to matters of brain functioning:

Well you've only got the words on the page haven't you, with any story or poem... You don't have all the hand gestures, you know there's a lot more in person... At Neuro Support I've gone on – well it's an assertiveness, motivation type of course... And at one part they were talking about how much percentage is in each different part of communication, be it the body language, the words, the tone, etc... When something's well-written, your head understands all the stuff which is being, you know all the extra stuff which it looks for, in communication, it reads from it. When you're reading something badly-written, that's what's missing is that your brain's unable to fill in the blanks, in that sense. And even if it's the right place for a comma, the correct length of the sentence, even saying the same thing in two different ways can totally change things.

The capacity to pay attention to the 'little things' which others might not have time for was important to participants. 'It's massive,' says S suddenly on realising the scale of John Clare's loss of all 'life's esteems': hence the *burst* of feeling when much breaks out of little. Similarly, H said at one point in 'Rich' a poem by R.S.Thomas:

I mean it could be, like, saying... I will use the little bit of happiness I have, to kind of make a bigger thing

– which reveals the mix of apparent uncertainty ('it could be, like', 'kind of' etc.) next to the emphatic stress on 'will use' and the sense of certainty/growth from that platform. The word 'use' is important in showing how literature can be useful without being simply instrumental –not least because the word comes just before 'thing': 'using' something when you're not sure what. As research assistant Magee put it: 'Is that not what the reading groups are a bit about? Use this to make that – even though the "that" is not exactly worked out yet... It is thinking in action.'

'I thought their interpretation was spot on,' said Joanne Harris on the group's attention to the word 'gilded' at one moment in her own story: 'And it was very interesting that they hit upon that word because the word has a dynamic within the sentence that makes it stand out... It is supposed to make you stop and think. I wanted the reader to pause in that place.'

She also commented on the importance of emotional involvement in defiance of certain kinds of academic purism common in the teaching of literary studies:

Interviewer: *It seems more emotional than reading on a course?*

JH: *I think it is, on a visceral level of interpretation instead of looking at style or trying to work out what the author was trying to say. What they [in the reading group] were talking about which in my view was absolutely right was how the character felt.*

Interviewer: As an author, that pleases you that they didn't talk about authorial intention?
JH: Very much, yes. Because it shows a level of engagement which I find creative writing students don't have because they have learnt to disassociate themselves from the piece of writing in a sort of... well, they are looking at the artifice and not the heart of it. I think that is the problem with how creative writing is taught.

Five Intrinsic Elements of the Experience

4

The Personal

Stories

Dr Lampropoulou commented from the point of view of a linguist, from initial basic findings: 'In the reading groups, there is *involvement* with the text that has been read out and this results in *self-disclosing* talk... In the built environment transcripts, there is still involvement between the co-participants and some sort of in-groupness, in the sense that they are sharing and exchanging opinions with regards to terminological issues, but the talk seems less interpersonal and more detached from the topic under discussion.'

Reading *Silas Marner*, participant F tells one story from forty years ago about his grandfather Harry, redundant and retired and every morning going to the bus stop but never taking the bus – like Silas with his post-traumatic syndrome. His family have told F that this was all in the past and he should have moved on. In relation to Pip shamed at the house of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, F tells another story about the humiliating cruelty he suffered from a particular teacher at special school. In relation to R.S.Thomas's poem 'Rich' ('when night/comes, offer the moon/unhindered entry through trust's/windows'), he tells yet another story about the aunt who raised him asking in her final night, 'Am I dying?' Such things, said F at interview, are to his mind in 'a parallel line' with the text. We believe that at best such memories are as it were the participants' own raw poetic material.

In all such instances when group members spoke autobiographically and subsequently were shown the appropriate clip, they claimed at interview (a) that they had not told the story before save perhaps to family and trusted friends or in a medicalised situation, and would not normally

Charles Dickens

Great Expectations

'You are to wait here, you boy,' said Estella; and disappeared and closed the door.

I took the opportunity of being alone in the court-yard, to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. My opinion of these accessories was not favourable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages. I determined to ask Joe why he had ever taught me to call those picturecards, Jacks, which ought to be called knives. I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too.

She came back, with some bread and meat and a little mug of beer. She put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry – I cannot hit upon the right name for the smart – God knows what its name was – that tears started to my eyes. The moment they sprang there, the girl looked at me with a quick delight in having been the cause of them. This gave me power to keep them back and to look at her: so, she gave me a contemptuous toss – but with a sense, I thought, of having made too sure that I was so wounded – and left me.

But, when she was gone, I looked about me for a place to hide my face in, and got behind one of the gates in the brewery-lane, and leaned my sleeve against the wall there, and leaned my forehead on it and cried. As I cried, I kicked the wall, and took a hard twist at my hair; so bitter were my feelings, and so sharp was the smart without a name, that needed counteraction.



speak in this way socially to comparative strangers and (b) that the memory was 'triggered' or 'tripped off' by the text. Also at interview, in response to specific questioning on this issue, the participants thought that the private stories and often vulnerable identifications offered by an individual other than themselves in the group usually had a genuine and educative place in the discussion, whereas in the Built Environment Workshop they would not be relevant but self-indulgent. In terms of resonant environment, many interviewees spoke of the GiR group as offering a 'safe', 'intimate', 'respectful', 'free', 'open' and 'confidential' space for serious reading and talking. But participant H, reviewing the videoed excerpts, identified more specifically the discretionary place she believed the reading-group helped to create in the world, as readers worked between themselves and the texts:

It was kind of halfway between – you know – telling them everything and telling them nothing. It allowed me to say something, but I didn't feel awkward about it 'cos I wasn't going into loads of detail.

It is in this arena between text and readers that the interaction takes place, markedly changing the normal relation of personal to social, private to public.

Personal echoes alongside the reading of the text

The starting point in the reading groups was that the texts, though fictional, felt immediately very 'real', and almost physically, sensuously and emotionally so, for being read aloud. L speaks in interview of the reading as an entrance into a felt world:

You remember when you read very very very good writing, you forget – it's just like a portal, like a portal into another person's consciousness... You know exactly what George Eliot's describing in Silas... 'The thoughts were strange to him now, like old friendships impossible to revive' – I think that's another one of those things, although it's described in words, it invokes, evokes, a kind of wordless knowledge inside your mind...

Yes, it so so, so real, but also heightened – the memory of a person, you once knew really really well and you can kind of conjure them in your mind, in an almost 3D way, you know, but at the same time you know you're unlikely to see them again – it's that portal into the accumulated experience of an individual – every single human has that accumulated... store of experiences and memories and I suppose some people are a bit more... aware of it than others – but everybody has the capacity to have that brought back to them – to have their memories brought back to them... I think you need really, really good writing to do that – I think it depends massively on the quality of the writing.

Professor Corcoran comments on that second paragraph, from the point of view of an experimental psychologist: 'This is the switch from outward attention to inward attention that is triggered by the salience of a text. In the terms of brain networks, the executive brain (actively attending to stimuli from the outside world, in this case the literary text) switches to the inward focused default-mode network where our own experiences are re-felt and reviewed in the light of the on-going context. It is more typical in our usual everyday

lives that we are aware of switching from default to executive – from mind wandering / remembering/ contemplating to attentive focus on what is actually and currently going on. Some of the value of GiR may lie in this less common *reverse-switching* awareness. The participants can go off into a world of their own in the reading *but*, vitally, the relevance of that world is now prompted by the ongoing activity/engagement. Furthermore, it becomes a shared world with relevance or resonance now in the outside world too, and that is a luxury one usually only gets when in the company of highly familiar people – close family or friends. The hypothesis would be that shared reading of literature speeds up the connections between people.’

The reading group creates a time and a place for personal contemplation. While it is often identification with a character that is the initial way-in to both text and response, at other times involvement was generated by the reader *not* having something he or she was glad to see realised in the text. Participant D said of loyal love in a Herrick poem that he was moved by this – which he had ‘*not* had’. This transformation of the negative was the memory of lack turned here into imagination of an ideal. A session partly on Nathan Hawthorne’s short story ‘David Swan’ centred not only on the difficulty of knowing what really had happened in a life but also on the importance of what might have happened but had *not*:

We can be but partially acquainted even with the events which actually influence our course through life, and our final destiny. There are innumerable other events – if such they may be called – which come close upon us, yet pass away without actual results, or even betraying their near approach, by the reflection of any light or shadow across our minds. Could we know all the vicissitudes of our fortunes, life would be too full of hope and fear, exultation or disappointment, to afford us a single hour of true serenity.

‘If such they may be called’ was the provocation to thinking. The literature often embodied those otherwise almost unthinkable ‘feelings of *if*’ found in imaginative involvement with other possible lives, as in Frost’s poem on ‘The Road *Not* Taken’. The language of the session was characteristically: ‘It could have been. It may have been... Something else could have, I could have...’

What was of further, related interest was when a participant identified with *two* characters at the same time or occupied the space between them. Participant An is at once a daughter who had to leave her mother for the sake of her own life but also a person who, like that mother, has found it hard to go out of the house. Speaking of the shop assistant who in Joanne Harris’s story ‘Faith and Hope Go Shopping’ was kind to the old woman who had dared to get out of the care home, she said, ‘I am *both* at that moment, both [trapped old woman escaping and the caring one]...’ At its most insightful, the use of the reader’s own experience in relation to the text is dual in being both a giving to and a learning from it, in imagination as well as memory. The ability to think of two people or two possible situations or two thoughts at almost the same time is a significant development in the work. This is registered in the transcripts through syntactic locutions, suitable for further linguistic analysis, such as ‘at the same time’ or ‘and yet’ or ‘as well’.

Robert Frost The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Conclusion on the Personal

The above are offered as examples of occasions when what has been set up via text and Group Leader is sufficiently strong emotionally not only to allow but to fuel and benefit from the personal movements in process. Naturally, not all such personal anecdotes or comments are so intrinsically triggered or valuable, though participants at interview often anticipated or confirmed the research team's own choices as to which did work. But rather than seek to establish abstract distinctions or clear borderlines, we concluded that the cross-over from proper to improper use of personal experience was not a problem, and worth the risk, so long as the movement does not break the resonant environment around the poem. The problem is not abstract but is itself a practical area or borderline that the Group Leader occupies. It is the Group Leader who most often brings the group back to the text.

The author Joanne Harris commented on autobiographical involvement and the two-way relation between text and reader:

Interviewer: What did you feel about the aspects of autobiography – did you feel they were being thrust upon the story?

JH: Not at all. I thought it was a very good reflection of the way people bring their own personal feelings and experience to the story. I have always felt that story is a two-way process, that the reader brings at least as much to the process as the writer if it is to be a rewarding symbiosis. The more experience you have to connect with, the more rewarding the reading experience is going to be. It is very nice as a writer to find a story you have written resonating with so many different people of different ages.

It was, she concluded, a process of 'translation'.



Five Intrinsic Elements of the Experience

5

The Group

The group did not really exist save as a static or notional unit *until*, through the text and the Group Leader serving it, live connections were made between one individual and another. Then its movements, connections and reconfigurations between different individuals at different moments in relation to different texts were unpredictable. Thus, sudden shifts from one participant to another made for a dynamic process of grouping and re-grouping in the course of any session. Video-recording offers evidence here: the videos allow a strong visual sense of these shifts, centres and relations. It was not simply that the groups were notionally respectful: there was a genuine and unpredictable mobility across age and class whereby at a key moment of realisation one group-member rather than another changed role – became a version of the Group Leader or the novelist, or the temporary spokesperson for the poem, or the sudden realiser of the personal meaning. This un-fixedness of roles within the group, the experience of never knowing on whom the experience will ‘land’, is part of the phenomena of emergence and democracy intrinsic to the nature of the sessions.

Differences and samenesses

When asked about the group interaction at moments such as that above from ‘I am’, H offered a more collective version of this modified rejection or refinement:

I think sometimes when you hear what someone else says, you either think, yes, that's what I mean or you think that's kind of what I mean but you see what the difference is between what they're saying and what you mean. So then you can put that into words easier than you can put your own big idea into words.

Example 1:

In a reading of the Joanne Harris short story, ‘Faith and Hope Go Shopping’, about two old ladies breaking out of their care home to go to the shoe department in Fortnum and Mason’s, the Group Leader suggested that the shop assistant was being kind to his aged customers who after all bought nothing. Participant An was emphatic in disagreeing with other participants (especially L who disliked the story’s sentimentality):

An: *I felt this man, this shop assistant was at his ordinary day or whatever, come in whatever, and suddenly he was having an **experience** you know and he realised it and he... he... it was an experience for him as well.*

Group Leader: *These two old ladies come in and he treats them kindly.*

An: *Well it was... it was... it was... I mean for him... I don't think it's just the word kindly, I think he **realised**, he... and he didn't, you know he absolutely was unfaltering you know it was... it was...*

Though the Group Leader was seeking to mediate between An and L, the normalising paraphrase ‘kindly’ produced an inner rejection in An expressed by her audible emphasis on ‘he realised it’, ‘an experience for him as well’. Viewing the recording, An later connected this moment of sudden imaginative conviction on her part to the assistant’s own ‘unfaltering’ behaviour:

An: *It was more than that, it wasn't knowing and doing and plotting and planning, he just did. And those moments can come and can come unexpectedly... And what I didn't like was the word kindness because kindnesses are what you do, very nice and kind, this was deeper...*

Interviewer: *Group work isn't just about agreeing or being surprised about sharing?*

An: *I felt there that it needed to be **heard**, it wasn't a case of us, or our feelings or interpretation, it needed to be heard what was being written, what was happening needed to be heard. I don't know if you are going to run the video on a bit but the fact that he gave her a rose – in the end she didn't need the shoes. Sometimes you think this is what you need and it can be something unexpectedly different. And again – background – for many years I couldn't go into a shop... and therefore for them to have that experience...*

‘More than’ may be a motto for literary meaning: An stresses here something she considers intrinsically deeper and more vitally necessary for humans than the casual normalisation ‘kindness’.

Example 2:

Participant S, looking back on the excerpt from *Great Expectations* on Miss Havisham, noted how she and L and An came together in thinking severally of their own mothers, stuck in habits that troubled their daughters in their relationship to them:

At first I think my attitude was oh but you didn't know my mother, thinking that nobody could have been like my mother. And then it gradually dawns on you that there are others the same, so it's a shared experience then isn't it.

Though conventionally it is diversity and difference that is to be respected and valued in groups, at times it was the *surprising* sameness, across the apparent differences, that was more prized.

Joanne Harris again provides a summary of the density of the simultaneously multi-dimensional experience from her own point of view: ‘It is happening at *various levels*. You have people communicating within a group. And people accessing memories and aspects of themselves they may not always be conscious of. And also you've got a level of communication with the writer of the story and what they're expressing. And *all* this is happening *at once*. This is why reading groups have become popular: because they are not just about reading, but about what you bring to the table.’

Joanne Harris

Faith and Hope Go Shopping

'I'm sorry,' I heard myself saying from a distance. 'That's a little too dear.'

From his expression I guessed he might have been expecting it.

'Oh, Faith,' said Hope softly.

'It's all right,' I told them both. 'They didn't really suit me.'

The young man shook his head.

'You're wrong, madam,' he told me, with a crooked smile. 'I think they did.'

Gently he put the shoes – Valentine, racing-car, candy-apple red – back into their box. The room, light as it was, seemed a little duller when they had gone.

'Are you just here for the day, madam?'

I nodded. 'Yes. We've enjoyed ourselves very much. But now it's time to go home.'

'I'm sorry.' He reached over to one of the tall vases by the door and removed a rose. 'Perhaps you'd like one of these?' He put it into my hand. It was perfect, highly scented, barely open. It smelt of summer evenings and *Swan Lake*. In that moment I forgot all about the red shoes. A man – one who was not my son – had offered me flowers.

Comparison with other forms of group-experience

There was no prior identification of histories or subsequent sharing of information with the Group Leader. Of the 14 participants, at interview 3 reported that they worked or had worked as a counsellor; and 6 others disclosed that they had undergone or were undergoing some course of therapy. Of the 6 all reported that they preferred the reading-group sessions to therapy sessions, as well as saying that the GiR groups offered more personal and emotional content as compared with the Built Environment Workshop. Interviews regularly involved contrasting the reading experience with experience in previous programmatically therapeutic group-experience. M saw therapy as a kind of policing, even self-policing; H spoke of negative themes and the focus on 'all sitting here because we were ill'; An noted that GiR groups were not there to talk about 'issues' in set terms.

Conclusion on the five elements

- That the reading group, and the literature within it, offers a small humane alternative (and partial antidote) to the experience of being judged or ignored by the world, or exposed in front of others. Community here means: *inner* lives come *out*, and come out *together*.
- That there is a need for literary language or language arising out of deep human engagement to inform, deepen, replace or modify set and clichéd terms on the public agenda.

6

Question arising from the five elements:

Is shared reading 'therapeutic'?

At interview A commented on the interrelation of private thinking and group involvement, especially when she was (often secretly, head down) most moved by a poem:

For me in that situation it was more helpful than one to one. We spoke in the group today just incidentally about how the groups become therapeutic although it's not – therapy. I didn't want the attention to be on me. I didn't want anybody to see that, so the group continued. And you know it was a safe place to feel like that – even if somebody had noticed, I wouldn't have felt this is terrible or it's disastrous. But I was glad to still feel part of it while I kind of adjusted.

The research question in regard to therapeutic usefulness is similar to the question as to the place of the personal. It is the problem of instrumentalism: is the effect at the expense of the literature which ostensibly prompts it? Is therapeutic too medicalised a term for the intrinsic value of the shared reading project?

Our initial task here is to indicate again the 'intrinsic' experience; but the term 'implicit' may be preferable, we repeat, because its relation to the 'explicit' may offer subtler relations than the intrinsic/instrumental division. That is to say: the explicit usefulness may be implicit within the experience, able to be drawn out rather than merely added on or employed instead. GiR may put participants in a *place* from which later they can draw out further developmental potential.

The identification of significant cognitive processes released in the reading group includes, for example, the recognition that thinking is not always straightforwardly or logically progressive in the effort to go programmatically fast-forward, but often works powerfully when members of the group refer *back* to a previous session or to a previous part of the text in the same session. Thinking backwards (or backwards and forwards) rather than straightforwardly re-enacts something of the density of the literature's meaning, in a fluidity of response that re-collects different time-stages in the work and re-creates meaning across the mental time-lines of a self's life. It is the process here – again worthy of further research – that seems to have intrinsic value to fundamental 'mental health' in the broadest sense of that term, whatever the (painful, difficult) content of what is being thought about. Other characteristics include:

• The Creation of Meta-levels

H in speaking of 'realisation' went on to discuss how personal reflection in these sessions involved a change in the level of thinking:

It just makes you think about things on a more... on a level that you can actually see, you know in your head you can see what you're thinking rather than it just being part of your general feeling on life, you know, you kind of pinpoint things more.

What is at stake here is genuine thinking instead of short-cuts that get by with name-based jargon. 'There is again this tension between the overall drive towards cognitive efficiency – the "best guess" or the "good enough" description,' comments Professor Corcoran, 'and the need really to get to the heart of things where deep appreciation/realisation lies. Live reading of literature may over-ride the drive towards cognitive efficiency – efficiency only in terms of apparent or short-term cost-benefit.'

In that change of positioning or level, the participant's own experience, instead of being registered lineally for example, became compressed in a release of realisation. In moments of self-reflection thus arising, it was notable how the person doing the thinking and the person being thought about were neither wholly identical nor utterly separate. For example: in relation to the Robert Frost poem, 'The Road Not Taken', on life journeys and often unwitting choices, D could talk in the group about his own 'lack of confidence' at a level that momentarily did *not* seem inhibited by it. F could tell the painful story of his own Dickensian childhood. E (with her own handicaps) spoke of how the disability of one of the old women in the Joanne Harris excursion was actually a benefit:

I was going to say I wonder whether Hope's blindness is actually working in their favour in that sense because she can't see how posh it is when Faith can, and she can see and she is thinking oh gosh, but Hope can't see that.

At this level the binary distinction between so-called 'negative' and 'positive' experiences also becomes transformed. Experiences that were painful, denied, seen as useless or suffered as shameful are now used, are usefully triggered in relation to the text, in the same way that a writer might employ his or her own experience, regardless, to create the poem or story.

• The use/transmutation of the negative and of the small

We have already indicated above the use of ostensibly little things (p. 11) and the potential transmutation of the negative (p. 10). We would propose that the literature widens and enriches the human norm, accepting and allowing for traumas, troubles, inadequacies, and other experiences usually classed as negative or even pathological. It is a process of *recovery* – in the deeper sense of spontaneously retrieving for use experiences and qualities that were lost, regretted, or made redundant. Often this seems to begin when what is normally dismissed as small contains something larger and hidden within it. The explosion of meaning was a mark of those *emergently decisive breakthrough* moments that are a major focus in this report – when participants find meaning, transcend norms or habits, reach higher meta-levels of awareness, or are awakened in recovery of former experiences in new forms. Recovery or

restoration may be more apt terms here than 'therapy'. In this light, here is a final example of a decisive 'breakthrough' in realisation arising out of this moment of discovery in *Silas Marner*:

To his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in the front of the hearth. Gold! – his own gold – brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away!... He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft warm curls. In utter amazement, Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child – a round, fair thing with soft yellow rings all over its head. Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream – his little sister whom he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy without shoes or stockings? That was the first thought that darted across Silas's blank wonderment. Was it a dream?... Silas sank into his chair powerless, under the double presence of an inexplicable surprise and a hurrying influx of memories.

Participant C notes the abrupt change in *Silas Marner*, for which he has no framework of explanation, at a moment of sheer transition:

Participant C: *But he doesn't think about the gold at all. It had been central to his being until then*

Group Leader (re-reading): *'and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child – a round, fair thing, with soft yellow rings all over its head.' It is lovely that to his blurry eyesight those rings are a bit like the coins: they are round, and golden erm... and then straight, no pause – 'Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream.' It's funny about the dream...*

C: *Well he just cannot... imagine... this is reality.*

GL: *Yes.*

C: *It's too wonderful.*

GL: *Yes, yes.*

C: *and the joy. It's... he just cannot comprehend.*

'Cannot' is stressed twice here (accompanied by a shaking of the head), making this an ultimate back-to-front reversal of the conventional negative, arising out a sudden shift from the norm and a breaking of the default framework of understanding. The realisation is, as in *Marner* himself, an awakening and a recovery. Rather than being cynically dismissed as 'too good to be true', the Real in C's formulation – 'too wonderful', too new and wholly unexpected – is become almost paradoxically what defies imagination. This dramatic example of the breaking down of expected norms and barriers as to what reality is and can be is a culmination of the reawakening and reappraisal process involved in the reading-group experience. It is the result of the process of unpredictability or not knowing in advance which ends here in a transcendence of reductive, habitual or depressed frameworks of understanding. Participant An spoke of this phenomenon as one of finding what one cares about by a process more heuristic than any straightforward opinionatedness: 'I realised this, from my response, was something important to me.'

Like a rocket-booster, the literature itself through its language challenges reductive norms. On such occasions we conclude with Joanne Harris: 'It is very, very rare that you actually get to witness that moment of discovery... That what you were hoping for (as a writer) actually happened for readers.'

George Eliot *Silas Marner*

When *Marner's* sensibility returned, he continued the action which had been arrested, and closed his door, unaware of the chasm in his consciousness, unaware of any intermediate change, except that the light had grown dim, and that he was chilled and faint. He thought he had been too long standing at the door and looking out. Turning towards the hearth, where the two logs had fallen apart, and sent forth only a red uncertain glimmer, he seated himself on his fireside chair, and was stooping to push his logs together, when, to his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in front of the hearth. Gold! – his own gold – brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away! He felt his heart begin to beat violently, and for a few moments he was unable to stretch out his hand and grasp the restored treasure. The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agitated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft warm curls. In utter amazement, Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child – a round, fair thing, with soft yellow rings all over its head. Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream – his little sister whom he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy without shoes or stockings? That was the first thought that darted across Silas's blank wonderment. *Was* it a dream? He rose to his feet again, pushed his logs together, and, throwing on some dried leaves and sticks, raised a flame; but the flame did not disperse the vision – it only lit up more distinctly the little round form of the child, and its shabby clothing. It was very much like his little sister. Silas sank into his chair powerless, under the double presence of an inexplicable surprise and a hurrying influx of memories. How and when had the child come in without his knowledge? He had never been beyond the door. But along with that question, and almost thrusting it away, there was a vision of the old home and the old streets leading to Lantern Yard – and within that vision another, of the thoughts which had been present with him in those far-off scenes. The thoughts were strange to him now, like old friendships impossible to revive; and yet he had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from that far-off life: it stirred fibres that had never been moved in Raveloe – old quiverings of tenderness – old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life; for his imagination had not yet extricated itself from the sense of mystery in the child's sudden presence, and had formed no conjectures of ordinary natural means by which the event could have been brought about.



Overall Conclusions

Therapeutic for not being therapy? Useful precisely by not being instrumental?

None of the participants, for all the general preference for reading groups over forms of formal group therapy, believes reading literature is simply, magically able to solve problems or that literature exists solely for that (instrumental) purpose. Participant L said at interview:

There's always the sort of thing as well about [erm] if I read something – I've done this my whole life – if I read something will it give me the key to sort out this really big issue in my life. As you get older and a bit more wise, you realise that probably not.

Nonetheless the strong residual sense of a personal purpose in the act of reading may be what is reflected in the higher Purpose in Life rating in the Quantitative Analysis. This is related to what Professor Corcoran calls the idea of the salience-uplifter (in contrast to psychological depression or epistemological neglect), itself instantiated within the 'big-in-small' examples given above. The activation of processes of high-level mentalisation, in relation to deepened emotional involvement in human areas created by the text, indicates such purposiveness in seeking meaning, however short of achieving simple literal answers or comfortable solutions. That is to say: the activation itself has intrinsic value in terms of increased mental involvement and vitality in areas of human seriousness.

Shared reading involves active rather than passive response, the experience of immersion, sharing and liveness, the articulate expression of feeling from real readers rather than a theoretical reader-response, the use of previously denied or painful experience in the challenge and acceptance offered by literature, a process that involves unpredictability and hesitation rather than a definite end point, and the potentially healing effect of a community formed out of the meeting of individuals' personal thoughts and feelings.

Further Research

1 Mental processes and changes experienced in shared reading are often identifiably expressed through the participants' own symptomatic use of language, itself affected by the language of the literary work. This language analysis of the participants' responses in the sessions, supported by the added dimension offered by video recording, is, we believe, a new emphasis in the deep understanding of inherent value within the group and the individual. The close interrelation of literary, linguistic and psychological approaches to these processes offers powerful, innovative insights that may be further developed in both qualitative and quantitative analyses involved, for example, in language coding. There remains much rich data for further investigations.

2 Comparisons with other group-reading activities, either using non-literary content or deploying more traditional reading-group procedures of reading the work in advance, are important in further development of the cross-over design.

3 Feedback to this report provided by psychologists and medical practitioners, including David Fearnley, psychiatrist at Ashworth Hospital, and Andrew Jones, consultant in pain medicine at the Royal Liverpool Hospital, has indicated the need to consider in further research the relation to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). These specialists – who (it should be noted) are themselves CBT practitioners and aware of the benefits – regard GiR as having potential to operate either as an alternative or as a complement to CBT. Richard Bentall, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Liverpool speaks of GiR as 'implicit psychotherapy' precisely by its remaining literary. Certain processes in GiR, already evidenced in this report, offer potential distinctions with CBT for future comparative study:

GiR works from below upwards, characteristically from a text previously not seen, without knowing-in-advance and often either implicitly challenging habitual emotions or recovering/transmuting them in a new form. CBT works from top down in terms of executive instruction, in particular in relation to preventing certain ruminative and repetitive compulsions.

- GiR is an open, wide ranging, evolving process, achieving its effects through triggering active happenings or unpredictable events which involve breakthroughs into meaning from within an experience. CBT is not a process but a programme that works instrumentally through disciplined planned stages, outside of immediate experience, in order to facilitate self-management.
- GiR works by induction, re-creating within the live environment the experience of different ages, languages, individuals and times. CBT is more concerned with a deliberately limited focal present characterised by concentrated mindfulness and does not endorse inductive thinking. Re-reading the poem several times, for instance, is markedly different from the rumination which mindfulness is designed to combat. GiR does not inhibit but seeks to transform negative experience, and indeed to challenge the positive/negative binary.
- CBT targets particular conditions and cases, and seeks predicted cures. GiR does not distinguish or categorise the individuals who come together in its groups. It offers no one aim in itself, but the Group Leader has a vital role in giving the literature a voice and a place in which to reach or find people who allow it. It uses cultural resources to widen and deepen the sense of the human norm and the thinking that goes into it, which includes significant shifts in level and perspective.

Professor Corcoran offers the following ambitious hypothesis for possible future testing: 'The "top-down" regulatory basis of CBT may be likely to produce only short-lived, "unowned" benefits, precisely because in times of stress executive control of our emotions tends to falter. If "bottom-up" approaches are used, the executive brain gets to work with genuine, spontaneous and "owned" gut or heart neuronal responses. Instead of trying to regulate or change these owned responses, the function of the anterior cortex becomes involved in integrating them into the schemata or models of the world. The benefits of bottom-up "therapies" may thus be more likely to be sustained because they are self-driven and integrated, rather than top-down approaches, which are originally suggested by another and then attempted to be taken on by the self.'

Final Conclusion

The cultural value of shared reading is established on the basis of a number of factors.

1

The multi-layered and humanising presence of literature in relation to both:

- personal contemplation triggered in areas of experience and meaning otherwise difficult to locate, recover or talk about without reductiveness of meaning: correlated with 'purpose in life' findings in the Quantitative Analysis
- the formation of small-group communities in which the relation between private and public was closer than conventionally allowed; creating for the while, out of the warm, complex and mobile interaction of individual, group, text and group leader, a small model of an alternative human society.

2

The related multi-layered impact on the processes of feeling and thought (correlated in this report with discipline-specific comments from psychologist Professor Corcoran) involving:

- live thinking, able to use surprise, uncertainties and even disadvantages with emotional intelligence
- a shift from reductive norms to a sense of ontological awakening
- the enhancement of mental processes such as realisation, reappraisal and reversal, meta-cognition, emotional identification, and imagination.

3

A humane literary-based challenge to set/superficial/over-literal terms on the public agenda: e.g. negative versus positive experience; the supposedly small compared to ostensibly big; over-simplified versions of articulacy, confidence, skills, progress, problems, cures, answers and solutions, therapy itself.

