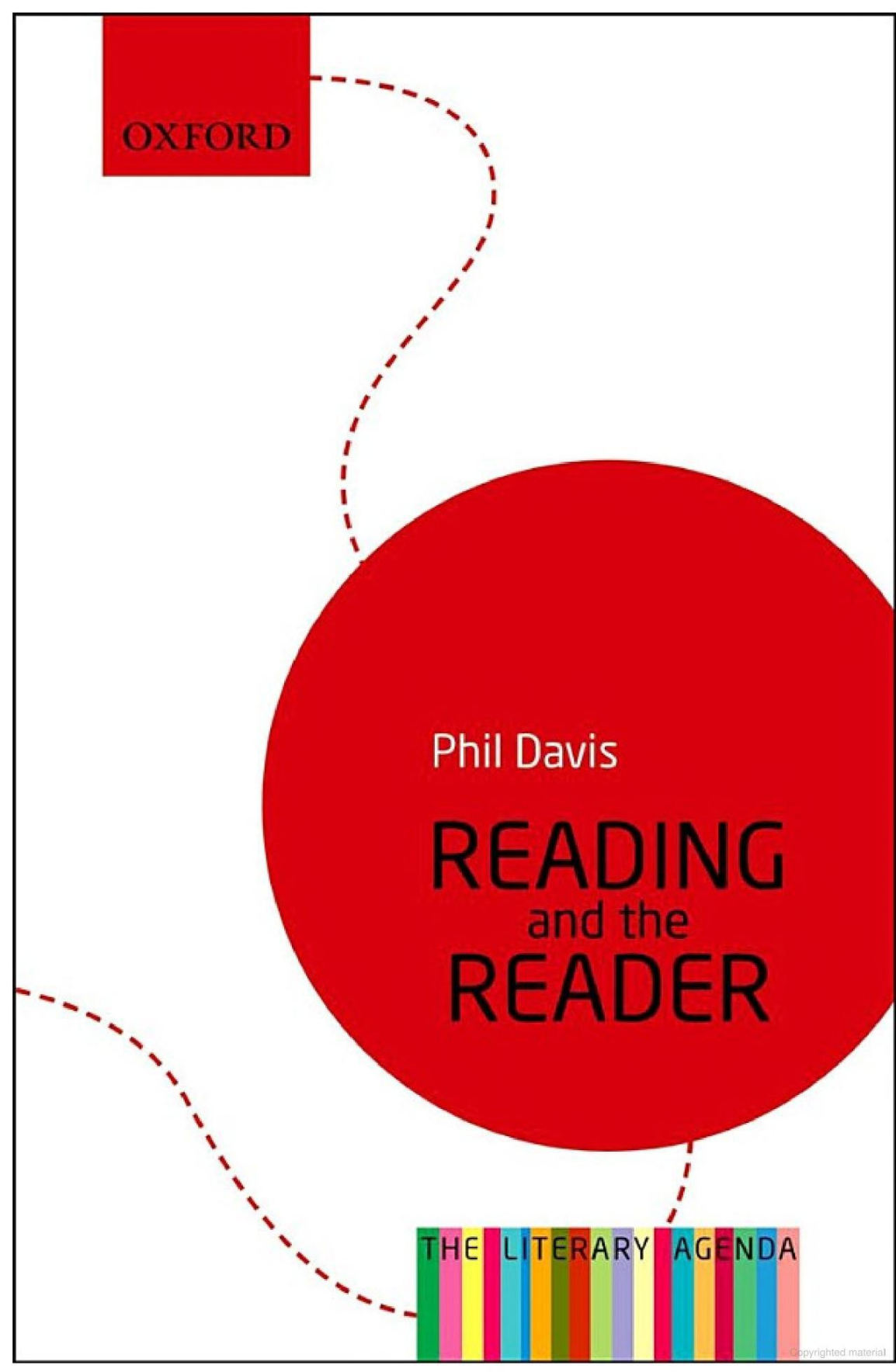

The Literary Agenda

Reading and the Reader

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Introduction

Wordsworth is a writer who frequently offers the exploratory reader in the midst of life a place from which to start. Trying to find access to his own thoughts, Wordsworth spoke of remembering *how* he felt at a particular time, but *what* exactly he felt he did not recall:

> but that the soul,
> Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
> Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
> Of possible sublimity, to which
> With growing faculties she doth aspire,
> With faculties still growing, feeling still
> That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
> Have something to pursue.
> (*The Prelude* (1805), 2.334–41)

The 'how' that Wordsworth works from here—the obscure, possible, growing feeling of inchoate thoughts—is not merely the how of ornamental literary style, of how most exquisitely to phrase what one already exhaustively knows. It is more like the poet on a walk whom Proust describes—halted for some time by some thought or object, then returning home quickly and silently as though 'afraid of spilling' what he has gathered, before ever he has had the chance to get it into the care of words.[1]

In A. S. Byatt's novel *Still Life* a woman sits in a library, first time away from her recently born baby, reading Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' in an attempt to get back some of the thinking-time she took for granted as a single, unencumbered student. She now has a husband, a baby, responsibilities, worries, and little time; yet she says to herself that she must not think about those things for the while but of the 'Immortality Ode' instead. Only then she thinks: all these things—the potential of a baby, the burdens of an adult, the movement of both loss and gain in going from one to the other—*are* what the poem is about. But that does not make it a set of itemized ideas; it makes it a place of refuge in which to find and sift her thoughts. So, connection made again, she reads the poem once more, closer to herself, until suddenly she sees how two quite separate little uses of the word 'deep' silently link and work together in the poem,

creating between them again a glimpse of that vision of the power of darkness essential to Wordsworth. What she has done is perhaps nothing much after all, since she soon finds it settle back into a banal and easy insight; but for the time in which it happened it was, indeed, like a moment of vision.

For the attentive reader of Wordsworth or Proust, the 'how' is not to be converted too quickly into the 'what'—the theme or message. Theirs is a language to be examined intently in 'deep', for its reactivated surprises and secrets, as if it were not just a medium of simple external communication but a means of opening and reopening, innerly shifting and deepening, mental pathways. Otherwise, what we all too often have to offer instead are our ready-made opinions and clichéd agendas; the acceptable social attitudes and the habitual stories of one's self that make nothing new.

It is easy enough to spot these formulae in others. There is a recent book by Barbara Ehrenreich called *Smile or Die* which is sub-titled 'How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World'. In it the author lists the often cruelly coercive assumptions of the life-coaches, the motivational thinkers, and their self-help books in their insistence on thinking positively—and only positively.

The vocabulary is predictable, and it determines the thinking that goes with it. 'To be disappointed, resentful or downcast' is to show yourself to be nothing more than a 'victim', a 'loser', or a 'whiner'. 'If you expect things to get better,' it is urged in the best-selling self-help manuals, 'they will.' After all, in life, we are told, 'we all make choices'. Consequently in the simple pluses and minuses of this accountancy, what is not going your way in life is disposable. So it is with people: 'Get rid of negative people in your life. They waste your time and bring you down. If you can't get rid of them (like a spouse or a boss), reduce your time with them.' As it is with thoughts: 'Whenever a negative thought concerning your personal powers comes to mind, deliberately voice a positive thought to cancel it out.' Accordingly, even as he gave out redundancy-notices, one employer was confidently claiming: 'People do come to see that losing a job was a step forward in their lives.' Herself diagnosed with malignant breast neoplasm, Ehrenreich did not relish the invitation to 'embrace cancer' or the public testimonies of those who had: 'If I had to do it over again, would I want breast cancer? Absolutely. I'm not the same person I was, and I'm glad I'm not.' This is a willed optimism, she concludes, an over-determined expectation, in place of the language of hope. 'Positive thinking' is an ideology in denial of genuine thinking, whereas hope is a vulnerable emotion which knows it is not entirely within its yearner's control, any more than in control of the future.

But the problem is not simply to do with what one can see easily enough in the extremes of others. Rather it is to do with a defective

equipment for thinking in oneself, equipment not so flawed, however, that one cannot continue unthinkingly using it. I mean such habits of mind—sustained within an insidiously lazy default language—as trap their owners within the set tracks that precisely avoid the reality of what they think they are talking about.

One of the most frightening accounts of that almost unavoidable and unrecognizable self-blindness is in John Stuart Mill's essay on the philosopher Bentham, his father's mentor in the creation of utilitarianism, the measuring of usefulness. What Bentham proposed was that the utility of all human concerns could be quantified in terms of a simple calculation of the balance of pain and of pleasure in any individual or any number of individuals in society. The principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest possible number' was a radical measure of human benefit designed to steer public policy through the confusion of a new industrialized, urban mass society. But when, even in this, Bentham is wrong

> it is not because the considerations which he urges are not rational and valid in themselves, but because some more important principle, which he did not perceive, supersedes those considerations. The bad part of his writings is his resolute denial of all that he does not see, of all truths but those which he recognises. ('Bentham', 1838)

This should be the great fear of the thinker who would be comprehensive and systematic: that whatever element is, even unknowingly, omitted or forgotten at the beginning of enquiry will cause the conclusions to fail at the end of it. It is like setting up our rocket on the launch-pad half a degree out of true: once launched we travel on not knowing how far, increasingly, we are lost in space. 'Nobody's synthesis', Mill concludes, 'can be more complete than his analysis.'

But what literature does, which formal philosophy for example commonly does not—and what literature can hardly help doing—is yield more than its writers know. In thinking about human life, it offers as much excess, untidied material as it can by not only thinking but re-creating the very objects of thought—offering more from within the very middle of things, I will argue, than a more secondary discipline can provide with more formally set starts and goals. Writers offer this by creating not so much a line of argument as a resonant space for thinking. In a book on his reading called *A Dish of Orts* (1893), the Victorian fantasy writer George MacDonald speaks of Wordsworth as a poet not so much offering ideas as putting the reader into the *places* (physical, mental, and situational) from which such ideas originally arise so that they come of themselves.[2]

To a literary thinker there is always what Bergson called the

invisible ‘fringe’ of meaning, where fringe signifies all that which darkly surrounded the evolution of a distinct idea, as its origin and its potential.[3] What it comes out of, what it goes towards, still latently and subliminally surrounds that final idea which thoughts become. It is proper that thoughts become consolidated into a shorthand ‘idea’, something in which mentally to carry them around, for use; but it is not all right when in turn the idea becomes deadened into dry residual opinion. To bring ideas back to life, they need places in which to *be* thought again, places closely approximate to the origin that stimulated them into being, where there is room to maximize that aura or resonance which lies around and behind an idea, so as to be thought and felt again as if for the first time.

But when our thoughts get separated from the memory of the places or occasions or people that first brought them into existence, we become increasingly entrapped in the routine hardening of our mental arteries. There can be an almost automatic default in the assertion of prejudice as principle, in the rapid assumption of those cynical set-attitudes that the novelist Marilynne Robinson, for example, laments: ‘When a good man or woman stumbles, we say “I knew it all along”, and when a bad one has a gracious moment, we sneer at the hypocrisy.’[4] No serious reader of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or of Marilynne Robinson’s *Home* would automatically think that. There is, similarly, a cautionary occasion in Nadine Gordimer’s *The Lying Days*, when a young white South African woman overhears a neglected member of her liberal group say something unusual which is not immediately acceptable to the party line. He simply suggests that to think everything as due to racial prejudice is itself a prejudice. Jolted, she thinks to herself: ‘It was a change of focus of the kind that interested me.’

Novels excel in that sort of sudden shift of point of view. Cut off from such revisionary changes of focus when the habitually general suddenly gives way to the new or reclaimed particular, our thoughts only become fixed habits of mind. We resort to what we *think* we think or what we are tacitly persuaded to sign up to. The literal is not the literary. A reading expert, Keith Oatley, reports that scanners show that once a metaphor becomes clichéd it no longer activates the brain’s motor system across domains as it did when new; my own collaborators in cognitive science have demonstrated how a dramatically compressed Shakespearean coinage such as ‘this old man godded me’ excites the brain in a way that ‘this old man deified me’ or ‘made a god of me’ does not.[5] Predictable opinions and conventional formulations merely flat-line, going along the boring old mental pathways they thereby reinforce.

We know so little of what actually happens in the act of serious reading. An early twentieth-century researcher, Edmund Huey,

travelled the United States investigating the teaching and practice of reading. ‘To completely analyse what we do when we read,’ he wrote, ‘would almost be the acme of a psychologist’s achievements, for it would be to describe very many of the most intricate workings of the human mind, as well as to unravel the tangled story of the most remarkable specific performance that civilization has learned in all its history.’[6] In all its youthful mix of limitations, possibilities, and even fantasies, brain-imaging is no more and no less than one (currently fashionable) part of a greater aspiration that must do its exploratory work at various levels and by diverse methods. The aspiration is to find what unrecognized or neglected powers the mind employs, what hidden shapes it takes, in the most powerful personal forms of reading, culminating in the experience of poetic thinking.

What follows in this opening chapter, then, speaks on behalf of a language used for something other than the reductive naming of themes or the delimiting of topics; something more than the paraphrases of opinion or the catch-all nouns of explanation or the strict linearity of argument. In literature, by the creation of felt context and underlying situation, thoughts show where they have come from, what they are related to and summoned by. This involves a writer finding a place, a site, for what otherwise might have no obvious place in the conventional epistemological frameworks of the world.

1. What is a holding-ground?

Creating significant space

Though a literary language is not just about the words, let’s start with words, and with one word: only it is a missing word, a word that will not come to mind.

William James, philosopher, psychologist, and brother of the novelist Henry James, was interested when he found himself seeking for a missing word that something in his current situation seemed urgently to call for. That in itself is James’s first major point: that words are not learnt or sought for their own sake but in the endeavour of *going after* things, in the process of pursuing them and trying to reach them. ‘There is a gap therein,’ he writes of this experience of blind mental search for meaning, ‘but no mere gap’:

> It is a gap that is intensely *active*. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed for term.[7]

You try this word and it's a lazy cliché; you try another perhaps more elaborate word but still it doesn't seem to fit or catch that 'wraith', that ghost or spirit of meaning intuited, as it were, at the back of the mind. Perhaps someone you know may helpfully suggest a general term that more or less covers what you seem to intend. But if that isn't what you mean inside, you feel yourself as individual to be normalized and stereotyped, and have almost to look away to keep that missing meaning still in mind. Because in all these efforts—

> if wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps. (PP i. 251)

It is far from comfortable to be stuck in that vacant but resonant space where you do not know, automatically, what is the next thing to say or write or do, only the wrong ones. But even as it jams the normal process of verbalization, this struggle for articulacy points to an unnamed 'something' creatively important within human beings—a compressed sense of meaning that needs language, is thoroughly imbued with linguistic possibilities, but exists ahead of its own formulation in words. James believed that a good third of our psychic life consists in 'these rapid premonitory perspective views of schemes of thought not yet articulate' (PP i. 253). The struggle to find words is a nascent form of poetry, about knowing and yet not-knowing at different levels. In writing, the not-knowing that goes on in front of the eyes, as they fix on the blank of the page, is trying to get in touch with that silently inchoate knowing that exists just behind them. When the knowing and not-knowing meet, it is an event that seems to make existence whole again.

So here, with Gerard Manley Hopkins fighting his own hopelessness:

> NOT, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
> Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
> In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

The poem is made out of what is almost a stutter of 'not' and 'can'. What is so powerful is the invisible two-way movement in all this: the way in which the poet puts down his monosyllabic starting-points and finds his own words return back upon him as half-thoughts prompting their further formulation. Thus the opening 'Not' builds into 'I'll not', then 'not feast, not untwist'; while the half-stifled cry 'can no more' is heard and met by the return 'I can'. Then it is 'can

—*something*' and '*not* choose *not* to be', the poet using whatever he has already got, however incomplete or negative, for more than he usually can. This is language serving as micro-surgery, doing intricate internal work where the normal thick fingers operate too clumsily. But such language must work on the very verge of the inarticulate when recourse to the refuge of easy names and obvious states (the terrible comfort of 'despair') is all too dangerously tempting.

'Namelessness *is* compatible with existence' (PP i. 251), James concludes magnificently. It means that something inarticulate *is* there demandingly in the gap of a missing meaning, and even in its resistance to make-dos, is looking for a further future existence for itself. That anterior stuff—prior to formulation—is precisely what the act of formulation points to and lives off. Without it, we do not start in the right place but too far on, in educated articulateness where words come easy but cheap.

What searching for the right word creates is, at the least, the sense of significant space, a space which it is necessary to fill in the right way, or the wrong way may lose and destroy it. Then if it works a sentence becomes an achievement—as George Henry Lewes, partner to George Eliot, describes when a writer is on the threshold of articulation:

> The words float suspended, soulless, mere sounds. No sooner are these floating sounds grasped by the copula, than in that grasp they are grouped into significance: they start into life, as a supersaturated saline solution crystallizes on being touched by a needle-point.[8]

The copula is a word that connects subject and predicate—typically 'is'. This is—what? Can—something. Or three words together, suddenly crystallizing into sense: 'wish day come'. In both senses, the words then 'start' into life.

I wish we could hold on to that sense of the start and the point just before it—that invisible generative place, all too soon absorbed again into the language-process in which it can seem only a means to the end called 'communication'. What is important here is something coming into a language that serves as more than a means: it is the invisible presence of mind behind, within, and between its words. For I think that wraith of meaning exists not only when you cannot find the right word but also after you have found it—in the release of meaning surrounding a verbal breakthrough, the ghost of competing words invisibly surrounding the finally chosen ones.

The example of Wordsworth

In a sonnet ‘There is a pleasure in poetic pains’, Wordsworth tells of how the thought of writing a ‘luckless word’, in the midst of composition, often obsessively pursues the poet ‘to the social board’, ‘haunts him belated on the silent plains’. Wordsworth has always been a good place from which to start—the poet most accessible to unpoetical natures, as J. S. Mill called him in his *Autobiography*. Wordsworth knew what it was to be blocked as a writer—the opening 300 lines of *The Prelude* are full of such inner frustration—yet fundamentally trusted that to see a problem was to see something hidden that might yet be accessible.[9]

Imagine, then, if Wordsworth were writing this last stanza to the poem ‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’, and had got to the sudden climactic of the penultimate line, looking for the final breakthrough:

> She lived unknown, and few could know
> When Lucy ceased to be;
> But she is in her grave, and, oh,

—And oh what? This Lucy was a young woman of no ostensible importance in the world; now dead. Suppose that ‘oh!’ marks the pre-verbal spot where the mental gap was, the threshold across which the words might or might not come to fit the rhymed mould created for them. Suppose (and this is purely my invention[10]) Wordsworth had then tried this, as perhaps most of us might:

> and, oh,
> The loss it is to me!

But that’s not it, says the summoning gap. The poet needs a breakthrough, and a breakthrough is what language should be when it most matters—not the petrified thought that is names and opinions. Wordsworth actually wrote this instead:

> But she is in her grave, and, oh,
> The difference to me!

The *difference* is something that reverberatingly *happens* here, properly filling the space left for it, but also like a deep private blow again to the heart. Private because that felt difference does not take the name of a single emotion such as ‘sadness’; it does not name emotion at all. In not saying explicitly what that difference is, and not having to, ‘the difference’ is thus like a brief and secret epitome of what language most serves for: *it* gives the word, but *you* feel its meaning.

It is like Wordsworth’s account of his poem ‘Resolution and

Independence' in which in the midst of dejection he comes upon an old man: 'A lonely place, a Pond, by which an old man *was* … not stood, not sat, but "*was*".' Words as fundamental as 'the difference' or 'was' were too barely, starkly demanding of meaning, says Coleridge, for those impoverished readers he defined as the enemies of Wordsworth, who needed a more elaborate poetic prompt:

> his works make them restless by forcing them in on their own worthless Selves—and they recoil from the Heart, or rather from the place where the Heart ought to be, with a true Horror Vacui.[11]

Unable to give a basic response, they fear the hollowness inside themselves that needs the stimulus of embellishment. They are, writes Wordsworth to Coleridge, people

> who are fed
> By the dead letter, not the spirit of things,
> Whose truth is not a motion or a shape
> Instinct with vital functions, but a block
> (*The Prelude* (1805), 8.297–9)

The readers for whom Wordsworth was looking instead were those who had sufficient imagination to realize that it is often the minimal and the humdrum, rather than the highest version of a thing, which may be closest to what is fundamental:

> In an obscure corner of a Country Church-yard I once espied half-overgrown with Hemlock and Nettles, a very small Stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the Deceased with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an Infant which had been born one day and died the next.

To Wordsworth that most minimal 'difference' between there being something and there being nothing—just one day of unfulfilled life—is the greatest difference there is. 'A violet by a mossy stone' is how he thought of Lucy, 'half hidden from the eye'. So it is in the churchyard with this barely named Infant who never spoke and barely lived:

> I know not how far the Reader may be in sympathy with me, but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing were imparted to my mind by that Inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a Tomb-stone.[12]

Such sympathetic readers are what Wordsworth also called *silent poets* in common life, thinking powerful thoughts amidst ostensibly prosaic sights, without ever writing anything down.

Creating a holding-ground

It is not just bringing a word into being that is William James's concern. Though James talks about these pre-conscious 'gaps' as though summoning the right words to fill themselves, he is even more interested in what he calls the wider 'fields' of human consciousness and how they are established.

Human beings have to be selective, says James, if they are not to be bombarded by the great booming, buzzing confusion of the undifferentiated world. Accordingly, we create narrow fields of consciousness in order to focus and survive. But those fields are only relatively stable, not fixed, just as consciousness itself is not an entity but a changing process. As soon as there lights up in the brain some new force of emotional interest, there is a corresponding shift in the mind's centre of attention and energy, and the field of consciousness around it.

What especially interests James is all that lies at and just beyond the margin of any temporary field of consciousness. By analogy with Faraday's work on electro-magnetism, he speaks of a magnetic field that exists outside and around the narrow focus of consciousness, to which our centre of energy turns like a compass needle. Just outside our immediate ken, an unclassified residuum—floods of memories, masses of residual powers—waits to come in.[13] James's active sense of gap, blindly pulsating with potential meaning, offers more when taken beyond the search for a single word and extended into consciousness's investigation of some initially ill-defined area of human concern lodged somewhere within the investigator.

Imagine, then, a person who is baffled by his own situation but needs to inhabit and understand it with all the resources he or she can muster. The philosopher R. G. Collingwood sketches one such version:

> At first, he is conscious of having an emotion, but not conscious of what this emotion is. All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is: 'I feel … I don't know what I feel.' From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something.[14]

The something that he or she *does*, says Collingwood, is to make language—not as simple naming but a language that becomes

exploratory once it has ceased to be automatic. Crucially, such a person is not one who knows in advance, whatever the intimations in the back of the mind. For the emotions happen before the person in whom they occur knows what their name is. Namelessness *is* compatible with existence. And yet in education, from lower to higher, from continuous professional development to motivational training courses, we insist on 'agreed learning outcomes' set up in advance, totally planned lessons even in improvisation, themed structures, constrained syllabi—all for the sake of what are called 'effective learning behaviours'. It is nothing like the way we think.

What the baffled person needs to do is to set up a focal space, a field, which represents the nameless dilemma, in order to create what we might call a holding-ground for investigation and contemplation. That space could be the map or mould that a sonnet provides; it could be the recollected landscape in which a poet such as Wordsworth mentally stakes out his thinking; or simply the area marked out by a potential story and the interrelationships its premise involves. In his *Apologie for Poetrie* (1585) Sir Philip Sidney spoke of 'an imaginative groundplot of a profitable invention'.[15]

Certain sonnets

Take Philip Sidney's 'Certain Sonnet 19', beginning 'If I could think how these my thoughts to leave.' It is a poem of rejected love and what then, if anything, to do with the thought of it. In it the poet twists and turns, so that when one line of thought says 'If x', it is always followed by the next line saying 'Or if y', x's opposite, thus going through a range of rhymed alternatives within a sort of poetic thought-machine:

> If I could think how these my thoughts to leave,
> Or thinking still my thoughts might have good end:
> If rebel sense would reason's law receive
> Or reason foil'd would not in vain contend …

The poem's pattern is what I will call a language-within-language—it tacitly says to its reader: Take this line with that one, take every 'If' with its equivalent 'Or', and measure both the symmetries and the differences between them as you read down as well as across the page. The familiar love-story is the ground-plot and the poetic form is the invention. From a third dimension above, the writer's mind can map and trace its own thoughts here, one by one on the two-dimensional page before it, and the reader is expected to follow. The poem's mould thus is made into a holding-ground for thinking thoughts, 'an orb of order and form' as Samuel Daniel called these little poetic worlds.[16] But inside the emotional *dis*order of the

content, ‘these my thoughts’ will not respond to the control of their thinker, his would-be active verbs left ineffectually pre-empted at the end of the lines (‘leave’, ‘receive’, ‘contend’). One way or another, says the poet tacitly beneath the austere formal elegance: Get me out of this dilemma.

The second quatrain in the next stanza responds to this silent inner cry by taking the linear alternation to a higher level, shifting ‘these thoughts’ from what ‘I’ can do in stanza one to what ‘you’ might do here—and begins again:

> If either you would change your cruel heart
> Or cruel (still) time did your beauty stain:
> If from my soul this love would once depart
> Or for my love some love I might obtain …

The reader is again expected to track the almost computerized movements of this second brain, there on the page, trapped in its own mechanisms. Nothing is ever just for ‘once’ here, done with for once and all; everything is at least twice over, first one way and then another, again and again. In this way the poem actually *works* within itself: it thinks, its brain has internal synaptic connections, as it were. Thus ‘change’ in the first line of this second stanza is counterpointed by ‘still’ in the second line, the two underlyingly interconnected in this mapped-out page-mind by the repeated ‘cruel’. ‘*From* my soul’ in the third line is in its desperation similarly played off against ‘*for* my love’ in the fourth, with ‘my soul’ and ‘this love’ trying like autonomous parts to get into the right relation between themselves. But if the poem’s language-law is that for every ‘I’ there is a ‘you’, and for every ‘If’ an ‘Or’, then that fourth line should read:

> Or for my love *your* love I might obtain

With quiet devastation there is unannounced *change* in the symmetry of things, a significant variation which shows the situation as suddenly worse. The poet has given up hope of equality: he can’t expect ‘your love’ as part of the ideal machine; instead only, at best, ‘*some* love’. Suddenly we see why that tiny word ‘some’ breaks into the little mental world of this poem, though who would have thought that ‘some’ could be the most emotional and human word in the whole poem? It is not that this poem is nothing but a machine, but that without its machinery it could not be *more* than a machine.

It is, in the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, ‘A place to stand and love in for a day | With darkness and the death-hour rounding it’ (22): a place to do thinking about disprized love. The Sidney poem ends, breaking down into the very elements out of which it was compounded in the first place:

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