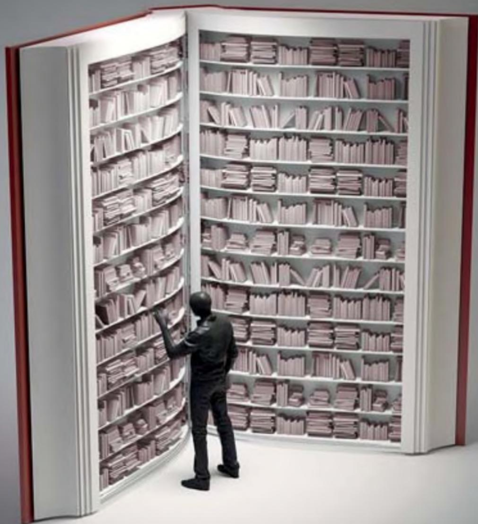
PHILIP DAVIS

Reading For Life



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CONTENTS

Permissions (texts) ix
List of Illustrations xv

Introduction 1

1. No Defence against the Words—A Story of Sonnet 29 20
2. The Schoolteacher 41
3. The Woman Who Pointed 62
4. The Woman Who Became a Poem 84
5. The Brain of Frances 107
6. The Doctor 129
7. Experiments with Renaissance Scripts 152
8. About Time—Three Little Poems 184
9. The Novel Experimenter 207
10. The Anthologist 224
11. The Novelist 248

Afterword 267

Reading List 273
Notes 279
Index 289

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e. e. cummings

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. 'Reading Hand'. © Joe Magee, www.periphery.co.uk. 3
2. Anthony Hopkins (*above*) as Pierre Bezúkhov in the BBC's 1972 adaptation of *War and Peace*; Paul Dano (*below*) played the same role in 2016. 42
3. Nelson Mandela's copy of Shakespeare. Lefteris Pitarakis/AP/Shutterstock. 63
4. Freud's ideal of the power of translation and recognition, diagram adapted from David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 72. 70
5. Armand Durand, *Kindred Spirits* (1849), Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2010.106. Photography by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 108
6. 'Bluet', Kim Smith. 110
7. Eye-tracking 1: prosaic processing (non A-HA). © Christophe de Bezenac. 164
8. Eye-tracking 2: poetic processing (non-A-HA). © Christophe de Bezenac. 165
9. Eye-tracking 3: A-HA surprise change from lines 3 to 4. © Christophe de Bezenac. 178
10. Activation created by A-HA moments in *both poetic and prosaic versions*. © Christophe de Bezenac, Noreen O'Sullivan, et al. 180
11. Increased activation associated with the need to update understanding *in poems over and above prose*. © Christophe de Bezenac, Noreen O'Sullivan, et al. 181
12. Oil refinery. © Laura Prime. 195
13. 'Reading Hands'. © Joe Magee, www.periphery.co.uk. 205

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INTRODUCTION

This book is in part a working anthology of poems and of extracts from prose fiction, but also a related series of case-histories of individuals reading, and thinking about their reading lives. Each chapter more or less begins with a literary text that triggers the feeling and the thought of what follows. The text becomes either the scene of a reading group, transcribed and analysed, or an opening into the wider life of its reader, recorded through interview or in reading diaries.

The double format of individual texts and individual readers seeks to enable the reader of this book to collaborate with the readers depicted in it, in a tacitly shared reading of the literary text on offer. My idea is that it may help to see other readers making efforts, perhaps in relation to a poem you do not immediately understand or, understanding, do not connect with; perhaps in order to make what may usually seem to be no more than small and transient verbal details more worthy of a sustained (because implicitly joint) sense of a significant reality on the page in front of us.

In this way *Reading for Life* seeks to provide examples and experiences of what goes into careful and intense literary reading. It tries to show what a more-than-passive form of reading can be like when, in relation to a powerful language in an important area, easy automatic processing no longer serves the purpose. The reading in action revealed and encouraged in this way is 'reading for life' in its first meaning: reading for its vitality and its effects upon vitality, going on alive at a far deeper level of being than information-processing or quick scanning ever can. It is the difference between a literal-minded and a literary-minded feel for words.

This vital difference may be further illustrated by one of this book's leading figures, John Berger, in an essay discussing the activity of translating from one language to another. Conventionally, in the world of technology, says Berger, it means no more than literal word-for-word translation as from the left-hand page in one language to another language on the right. But this operation—which is just

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like scanning and summarizing and paraphrasing—makes for only mechanically second-rate translation, a mere second-hand copy of the original:

> Why? Because true translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal. One reads and rereads the words of the original text in order to penetrate through them to reach, to touch, the vision or experience that prompted them. One then gathers up what has been found there and takes this quivering almost wordless 'thing' and places it behind the language it needs to be translated into. And now the principal task is to persuade the host language to take in and welcome the 'thing' that is waiting to be articulated.[1]

Look at the mental work and complex movement described in all these adverbs and prepositions that are around the verbs, in search of that third thing beyond a literal meaning: *behind* and *before*; to return *to* and to penetrate *through*; gathers *up* and places it *behind*; translated *into*, to take *in*. In the risk of trying to get back to where and what the words came out of, truly imaginative translation is for Berger a re-creative model—and a model which serves for more than just translation itself.

That is to say: it is a template for all serious writing, working to-and-fro between pre-language and language itself, translating from the pre-verbal intuition to the verbal formulation that partially recognizes it, as in an act of metaphor. What is more, it is that underlying imagined spirit conveyed within, behind and beneath the letter, which deep literary reading—on the other side of the writing, on the receiving end—also exists to host, to hold, and to translate. Like good translators, good readers do not just literally convert what the writing says, word for word, and think that sufficient for understanding. They co-operate in and learn something of the craft of writing, of why this specific formulation or how this particular turn of phrase has somehow *got* to them. They try to become the readers that their writers seem to be seeking, but more than that, the readers that the writers themselves can be even in the act of their own writing. For writers are also in this sense momentarily readers of themselves—because it is not that writers seek language just for it allow them to speak, to communicate, or to express outwardly, but rather for it also to speak back to them, to reflect back, and answeringly *tell* them something.

For example: at the sudden death of his wife from whom for many years he had been partly estranged even in their living together, Thomas Hardy seems only to have had left to him the resource of writing carefully crafted words on a page. The reader can almost feel him looking down at the lines in the act of arranging them under his hand:

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> Never to bid good-bye
> Or lip me the softest call,
> Or utter a wish for a word, while I
> Saw morning harden upon the wall,
> Unmoved, unknowing
> That your great going
> Had place that moment, and altered all.
> 'The Going'

Dying alone in her room, she left unannounced and without a word: it felt to him, after, like a silent act of separation, an almost deliberate leaving of him, even at the moment when, as was all too usual he, unsynchronized, was not thinking of her, was unmoved by her. There was nothing left to say, it seems, in that marriage, and so the writing begins where the speaking had failed Now, moved too late, Hardy writes the word or two that she did not say or did not want to ask him for. And as he writes and sees what he has written, he also *hears* for a moment, at the pause of the rhymed line-ending, the '*going*' happening again, coming back to hit him in the impossible shocked instant of death, and in the silent inner cry of his being abruptly bereft. That is the reading of his own writing, the hearing of his own silent script.

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'Unmoved, unknowing/That your great going/Had place that moment.' The jolt of 'going' has taken 'place' again on the page, a millisecond before it is realized as having done so, before it becomes fact once more. This is the still quivering 'almost wordless thing' that writer and the reader can innerly feel and hear—and not just see—within the words and between the lines. This is like Berger's imaginative translator reading and re-reading 'the words of the original text in order to penetrate through them to reach, to touch, the vision or experience that prompted them'. Reading for life is—in its second meaning—reading for the sake of re-freeing the life that books hold within them; translating *from* literature, as something more than a self-contained area, back into human beings all that literature saves from being otherwise lost, unrealized or uncreated.

So it is that I want to suggest in these pages that literary thinking, amongst readers as well as writers, is a form of thinking about life not always recognized *as* thinking in the wider world, but here made live and present and specific. This book is concerned with the intuitively emotional—the surprised and excited, the disturbed, and the suddenly autobiographical as crucial initiating involvements; but it is not just about these things, it is about the messages of thought echoing within them for further discovery. This is not a book in favour of using texts merely as excuses for personal confession at the expense of what is being read. Of course a text can withstand undue personal appropriation, and cannot mind it—and perhaps any form of human relief is to be welcomed. But then it is not the literature that does it, when what literature can do is more complicated than that. I will not be arguing that literature can simply offer instrumental answers, novel cures, poetic therapy, or simple self-help effects. All that is too direct and simple a translation. The lives recorded in this book cannot be resolved into simple success stories resulting from very good reading, or they wouldn't be real lives.

Instead *Reading for Life* focuses first on raw moments—whatever may or may not come of them—when readers are suddenly taken aback by fiction. That is to say: when they feel as though they are found out, or attracted by, something that acts almost as an extended part of themselves, or makes them become an extended part of it, in the unclear borderline area between the subjective and objective. One of this book's other great protagonists, William James, describes this near-blind feeling of sudden connection:

> It is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling... Such an iron bar could never give you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly; yet of their presence, and of their significance for its life, it would be intensely aware through every fibre of its being.[2]

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You don't always know in advance what will affect you, and though that may seem back-to-front, I argue that this is the right way round for human beings. Not to know beforehand leads to trying to find out why this has happened, what this still stands for. When a serious reader is, as it were, James's experimental iron bar, that receptive instrument for reading in action, then reading also means going on to try to detect what it is outside that has got you, and what inside is responding to it, looking both ways. Georgina, the reader who is the subject of chapter 9, says:

> **When the thoughts just come to you, there is an involuntariness about them that is very easy and a bit beautiful, but it is very difficult to hold onto them. You think or say something, and then say to yourself, 'Where did *that* come from'—exclamation and question mark at once . . . I want to get to the place where it comes from.**

This is a different way of thinking, sudden and flexible, receptive and mobile in the very midst of things, with much that is personally and emotionally at stake in its efforts. The change of level from initial instinctive feeling to the extrication of the thoughts within feeling, without their becoming cold and inert, is vital to the chances for mental life and mental development.

So the chapters that follow seek first of all to disclose, in practice, what may be called 'the literary moment': that otherwise small and transient instant of heuristic realization when readers suddenly do something deep or subtle or moving at a minuscule point within the text, not usually taken into account in more generalized accounts of what reading is. It is like the word 'going' suddenly realized in all its force, in Hardy's poem of that name. It is the point at which, as William James might say, we truly catch reading in the heat and feel of the individual act of doing it. As he tells the audience for his Gifford lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> You can see now why I have been so individualistic throughout these lectures, and why I have seemed so bent on rehabilitating the element of feeling . . . Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done. *Varieties*, pp. 501–2

Reading for Life is not about religious experience as such, but it is about individual acts of triggered contemplation that for some readers have had to become a replacement for religion in the search for human meaning amidst the deeper, darker strata of inner human reality. This book will try to show that the breakthrough into

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deep and active reading represents a shift from normative ways of thinking into a richer language and a more real understanding of human existence, important to the capacity of lay readers to think the thoughts necessary to them. This goes deeper than therapeutic step-by-step programmes and, as some participants in this book indicate, is arguably more freely therapeutic by *not* being therapy in a directed top-down form. To achieve such a breakthrough, the presence of literature is necessary to act both as a trigger, reaching levels of emotion, memory, and recognition not normally available or easily accessible in daily life, and as a rocket-boost to produce an accelerated excitement of felt intelligence dependent upon the primary prompt of a stimulating text. What is given in these pages then, instead of general top-down theories of 'reader-response', are actual accounts of individual readers, and specific acts of reading, driving towards thought from below upwards, out of the sense of magnetic attraction.[3] Again I hope what you will read here will show, as near live as I can make it, what a more explicit argument cannot always emphasize without interruption to the individual account.

So I need to emphasize here and now that these acts of reading are not only manifested in often subliminal moments of minute change and microscopic attention. Within those micro-moments, like something big exploding within something small, or long-standing within the transient, are also the macro-concerns of the lives of readers featured in this book, brought to their minds by the works they read. This present book does not give and cannot know their whole life-stories: it just reveals momentary fragments of almost involuntary memory. These triggered realizations are more deeply authentic in their sudden heat than conventional narration of personal events or normative explanation of past motives when the reality has begun to fade again into paraphrase. This is reading for life, in a third sense, for the sake of readers' own existences; for the prompting of old and the development of new powers of mind; and in particular, for the glimpsed sense of the books' relation to the lives and thinking of their readers, blending into an almost musical system of interrelated resonances the time of reading in the foreground with the reader's own lifetime in the back, like a poem itself.[4] It is also what prompts a fourth sense: a commitment on the part of some of the subjects of this book to try to hold onto and use the after-effects of their reading, and become lifelong readers in search of meaning. All this is what my colleague Rhiannon Corcoran, a professor of psychology, calls 'literature in practice, psychology in action', with something real and revivifying to say to both the study of literature and the study of psychology when they become too established and static.

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'The best way to think about reading,' says the literary critic Mark Edmundson, 'is as life's grand.'[5] *Reading for Life* has in the background, for some of its sources, the story of a reading outreach organization that has very much to do with creating those second chances through the realm of literature, or with trying to make a second small world, a warmer human environment, in which to do better thinking.

The Reader, founded in 1997 by Jane Davis, exists to bring the richest possible legacy of serious literature from the sixteenth century to the present day into often hard-to-reach or easy-to-ignore communities.[6] The organization currently delivers over 500 groups per week nationwide, each involving two to twelve participants, in a range of health, educational, and social care settings (community centres, schools, libraries, homeless shelters, facilities for looked-after children, hospitals, offices, doctors' surgeries, prisons, drug rehab units, and care homes for the aged) across the UK. It has partners and associates in Denmark, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia. In England in particular, its remit includes people specifically suffering from mental health problems and social isolation—with the emphasis on depression, dementia, and chronic pain. But, more broadly, it is an outreach programme that is not only concerned with what is wrong—with illness and suffering and pain. Rather, it seeks whomsoever it can reach, in whatever way books can find, offering contemplative space for all people whatever their background, known and unknown. Within these local communities, literature is read aloud to those who for a variety of reasons might not otherwise read it, to give glimpses of how life is or might be, should have been or has to be, in a renewed sense of purpose or dignity or concern for themselves. These shared reading groups provide part of the content of *Reading for Life*: in what follows you will find, amongst other evidence taken from elsewhere, both transcripts of group sessions, and interviews with individual participants.

What is important is that these groups are not traditional book clubs whose membership is of limited ethnological range, and where books (normally, recent novels) are read in advance and then discussed, often at the level of opinion, only in retrospect. *The Reader*'s model of Shared Reading involves diverse people reading *live*, aloud and together, with intervals for focused analysis and personal reflection. These sessions are led by a project worker—often, a graduate in literature, though increasingly taken from a cohort of trained volunteers—whose role is implicitly educative as well as facilitating. The reader leaders will seek to enable a warm and friendly atmosphere in which the reading aloud of the work helps create a frank and humane atmosphere in the room. But with the text there in front of everyone for eye as well

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as ear, the group leaders will also push for a careful look at the actual words, the turns and nuances and telling details. They will want people to take the work seriously, personally, and this means allowing free room for mistakes, awkwardnesses, and autobiographical utterances; but they will also regularly re-read the text, aloud, and with care bring participants back into it. The group-work goes on along a spectrum: at one end, an unemotional reading that may respect the text but brings no life out of it; at the other, an emotional response that may leave the text itself too far behind. If anything, the reader leader will far rather risk the latter rather than have the former, but the task is to work within the spectrum, to adjust and realign as the session goes along, rather than rule in or out. Any requirement for simple fixed boundaries in this complex area seems unreasonable. There cannot be utter purity, or tidy abstraction, any more than there is meant to be messy self-indulgence or self-conscious confession. It is about creating an immersed experience, which is the very opposite of knowing-in-advance, by following the processes of reading an often unknown text in all its challenges and bafflements, turns and unpredictabilities. It is about taking literature out of the academy but with the best benefits of academic training, producing through this experiment human effects that should play back into a re-understanding of the role of literature in both the wider world and in the education that should provide for it.

I have said the informal group setting and the act of reading aloud give access to literature to people who may not usually be accustomed to it. Theirs may not be a problem of literacy as such. Depression may prevent people from being able to concentrate sufficiently to bother reading on their own, even if in their better times they are already established readers. Or serious literature from all ages, and in particular poetry, may seem dauntingly elitist or irrelevantly difficult, an unlikely form of human help, for those without experience of reading in this area or at this level. 'Try it' is all the reader leaders say, and then a reader might later respond, as one did, saying, 'You need it, you just don't know that you do.' These lay-readers for the most part would not consider themselves exceptional or even well-educated, but by their very need make for a testing-ground within the norms of life for the effects of literary-inflected thinking.[7]

Those who have less, often give more. But there is no mistaking the effort and faith and persistence required. Alexis McNay running a reading group in a prison on Merseyside describes how it can be amongst the men on the wing, on what he calls the 'razor's edge between positions of brazenness and insecurity'.[8] First, there is often the macho brazenness, defiant and dismissive when confronted with literature often thought of as somehow 'soft':

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> A very quiet young man, attending his third session, was asked by another member of the group what he thought of the opening of *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. 'It's shit,' he replied. When I asked him to elaborate, he said, 'It's just about some little Mexicans and their baby... It's boring, I'm not interested.'

But then on this particular occasion something else also happened:

> A little piqued, I let my own guard down momentarily: 'Would it be better if it was about you?' I ask. 'No, it would be worse,' comes the immediate reply.

That was the chastening moment, a sense of what might be hidden behind the stance of external rejection. Michael, a prisoner with thirty shared-reading sessions under his belt, and a perceptive intelligence, recognized it and at the end of the session he advised Alexis: 'Persevere with this'—meaning, Alexis thought, both the book and the young man in question. 'There's a lot of front out there; they have to present it. But they see after a while that they don't need to bring it in here: they can leave it out there.' 'In here' and 'out there' *are* very different places, though only a nine-inch wall apart. And 'in here' the young man might begin to let go of his front, for what exists more vulnerably behind it. Alexis did persevere not only by reading every week, but within each weekly session re-reading and repeating the same few lines out loud, as an act of persistence in what he felt was crucial:

> One afternoon we're reading Raymond Carver's poem 'Happiness', which describes the simple beauty of the companionship between two boys delivering papers, appreciated at a remove by an onlooker. When we read the lines
>
> They are so happy
> they aren't saying anything, these boys.
> I think if they could, they would take
> each other's arm.
>
> —then the new young man in the room, uninitiated, and testing the water in mischief more than malice, says, with a nudge and a wink: 'Sounds a bit gay, doesn't it?'
>
> 'If they could they would'—but they too can't quite. I'm scrabbling for a response suitably diplomatic—this is John's first contribution, after all—and yet corrective. Before I can sort my Ps from my Qs, Michael raises his own point of order: 'What are you saying that for? This is a serious group, this; we take it seriously—it's not for dickheads.' John, surprised, amused *and* slightly wounded, says defensively, 'I'm not a dickhead!' and Michael completes the exchange: 'Well, don't say dickhead things, then.'

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Alexis concludes:

> **It is all taken in good spirits, and we segue directly into some really good discussion, but it's been a revelatory moment for me. Not only is it moving to see such a vehement protection of this space, valued for a different kind of interaction, but there's a bigger and more significant implication in the wording of the exchange: that any distinction between the said and the sayer doesn't hold, here in this group. In prison, as in society generally where a lot of people too often 'speak their mind' without much thought as to what they're saying, the idea that one is inseparable from what one says, and should take responsibility for it; the idea that what you say represents you in a fundamental and important way; the potential for this rigour to refine thought itself; and the fact that a group member is demanding it: this makes me realize this can be a great thing here.**

It is more dramatic that this is a prison setting, but so often the extreme only reveals what is muffled and hidden in less exposed and more common situations.

If it is hard to make a beginning, it can also be hard to carry on. Another group-leader, Grace Farrington reports on a man she calls Nigel who, diagnosed with personality disorder, is a long-term resident of a high-security hospital supporting the provision of specialist care for forensic psychiatric patients. The group is reading a poem entitled 'Begin' by Brendan Kennelly which you will find in chapter 6, and Nigel, highly intelligent, almost always gets to what is crucially important within seconds of the poem finishing:

> Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
> that always seems about to give in
> something that will not acknowledge conclusion
> insists that we forever begin.

> ***Nigel:*** **He was saying very roughly that beginnings—like the beginning of the day or the beginning of activity—is something that is built into us. Although it might appear that things are ending, or we may have thoughts of things ending, there's something inside us that always says, you know, begin... I'd have a hard time saying anything else about it.**

He has seen it so quickly that there feels as if there is nothing less to say. And Nigel struggles with feelings, which is why perhaps his intelligence is so quick and final. But Grace comments:

> **Nigel seems to need the assurance which I was often not fast enough to insert into his rapid train of thought. It was as if he was trying always to be self-sufficient, and**

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> **was worried at the idea of coming up short, or even failing himself in some way. But already he has several thoughts to *go* on here, and he had a sense of that insistent 'something'—'there's something inside us that always says…'—which not only powers the poem but suggests a powering of life itself.**

Yet always there is this potential obstacle to expansion, even here imaged in small. The thought seems to need to last longer, to warrant more words in becoming bigger. It wants another sentence, more thinking not to let it go short, to establish the possibility of making the 'something' into a genuine subject capable of further development. But if the person who has found it cannot find anything more to say of it, or if no one else will come into the conversation and respond, the danger is that the life of the thought runs out and dies there. Yet that at least can make finding the next word, the extra sentence, something better than polyfilla, when a sense of greater reality, and the need for more of an immediate future, may be urgently at stake.

*

But for all the difficulties, a caveat or corrective here. Though literature deals so much with human struggle and trouble, because (of course) human beings themselves do, not all the participants in these groups or in this book are unusually troubled, ill, or traumatized, and the literary works chosen offer a full range of human responses rather than merely 'problems' or 'examples' or 'cures'. The readers in chapters 6 and 10 make a point of emphasizing this. It is the release of human energy that is important, almost defiantly regardless of whether the subject-matter is itself ostensibly miserable or celebratory, though deeply moved by it. For all the institutional setting, the damaged predicament, even the sometimes painful content of the literature, Peter says of his shared reading group in an addiction centre in London:

> **It's real isn't it? It's real. That's me. You can't lie. Why would you go there and lie? It's just so…it's just so pure, there's something beautiful about that group, there's something quite pure going on there. We're being offered a golden afternoon of being ourselves, being allowed to be, be ourselves, aren't we.**

Psychologists report that one of the signature symptoms of depression is over-generalized memory—the inner voice that keeps repeating that life is always bad, or I am always terrible; but the force of literature here is to do with a 'real' specificity that in its life fights generalized attitudes, eluding easy categories or prescriptive solutions. And when that force works in these less privileged contexts, there is

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nothing taken for granted as there might seem to be in more comfortable and blasé settings: it works as if for the very first time again—'real', 'pure', not to have to tell lies but to be me, 'beautiful', 'golden'. As a character in a novel by my old schoolmaster Stanley Middleton puts it, baffled as to why he keeps going to an inferior local musical performance when he could afford to hear it done better elsewhere:

> 'I wonder if it's because seeing something happen at its most humdrum gives you a better insight into its nature.' [9]

It is a Wordsworthian insight that the rough and struggling may offer a more core understanding than the smoothly professional. So in shared reading in a mundane setting we may find a recovery of the roots of why reading literature matters, a recognition of why older literature and a more challenging or unpredictable vocabulary has a vital role, as opposed to either the most apparently 'relevant' novel published this year or a well-intentioned self-help book. What I suggest these case-histories offer is a way of rediscovering the importance of the activity—the thoughtful reading and study of literature—prior to its sometimes professional self-enclosure, through seeing the raw material of its importance to people outside the discipline who nonetheless are involved, however informally, in concentrated reading. For the point here is that with literature anyone, given the opportunity, can get direct access to the original texts. It is not like science or even history, where sources and discoveries must be filtered through secondary descriptions, textbooks of explanation and summary. Reading literature is never first of all a separately specialized activity.[10]

Recording or sitting in on these shared reading groups allows us to see in basic and informal settings what is usually hidden and private: people in the act of thinking about literature. Admittedly this is reading within particular group-contexts rather than people reading silently and alone. But the transcripts of audio-recorded or filmed reading in real time reveal to us, live and spontaneous, at least something of what people actually do when they are reading, and not just what they say or think they do in retrospect. 'Us' here refers to a second organization that helped in forming this book, the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS). It is a research unit I set up with Josie Billington and Rhiannon Corcoran in the University of Liverpool from 2010 to take the study of literature out of a literature department, to allow literary specialists to collaborate with psychologists and health professionals within the University's Institute of Psychology, Health and Society. This allowed for a wide variety of overlapping methods of exploration and cross-disciplinary perspectives. In what follows, you

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will see results from brain-imaging studies; from quantifiable questionnaires and self-reporting measures of psychological health and wellbeing; from interviews; from physiological experiments in measuring changes in heartbeat, cortisol, galvanic skin responses, voice levels, and eye-movements; from thinking in a combination of literary, psychological, and philosophical terms. But above all perhaps, this book is dedicated to exploring the impact of the language of the texts on the actual language of the participants, in the development of a subtler emotional lexicon, a more intricate syntax, even as they think. The analysis of the responses involved collaboration between literary critics, scholars in linguistics, and psychologists in examining these movements in the relation between language and thought. To get beyond the norms of stock responses and reductive vocabulary seemed important not just for literary reasons but for the transferred effect of literature in enabling readers to think their own thoughts inside and outside reading with more dignity and more precision, to take the reality of themselves more seriously.

In this investigation, CRILS also recruited evidence from sources outside shared reading and *The Reader*. The reading-group accounts are supplemented in what follows by more longitudinal accounts gathered from interviews and readings with solitary and private readers—some of whom helped form *The Reader* itself or moved on from its shared group reading (chapters 1, 5, 10); some who quite separately were graduates from (often part-time) degrees combining study with relation to personal or vocational praxis (chapters 2 and 9), and others who from within their own professions as teacher or doctor, as well as poet or novelist, offered us in reading-notes and interviews the nature of their own experience (chapters 2, 6, 7, 11).

What I do think many of these committed readers have in common is their need to create time-out for an inner life, a second world within this world, not in simple retreat from it but for the sake of attempting a better return to it. Reading for them is at once a guided and a spontaneous activity, the one arising within the other. And that is why *Reading for Life* might be also be thought of as reading *for* a second life, or *in* a second life—for two reasons. First, because the idea of second lives, found through books, recognizes the readers' ordinary need to ride upon *other* minds to begin with, enabling their own minds to arise within the minds on the page, into areas suddenly made more open and thinkable by the literary text. And secondly because as the philosopher Hannah Arendt said, all thought that comes out of human experience feels more like after-thought, like something coming second rather than first.[11] For most of us, thinking is not something that feels clever, a rationality in advance of events or even in time with them, but more like personal catch-up, illuminated almost too late in the lag of time. Yet this enhanced capacity

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for reflective second thought, derived from reading, offers readers access to a partial reclamation of experience at a different level of mental self. In some case-histories, this is felt most powerfully in relation to what is experienced as initially failed or botched attempts at living. But literary reading in itself becomes a second chance by offering for anyone, whatever their condition, another place, a formal holding-ground, for exploring the contents of experience.

It is like something that Jack, a participant in a local library group in Croydon, described in reading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. He is large, gentle man of West Indian extraction thinking here about a little white English girl—and if that seems unlikely and surprising, 'I don't see her as a 10-year-old girl', is what he said at interview. He felt the cruel treatment she received: 'It's not physical, but it is almost like being in a boxing ring with someone. There are certain things that affect your mind, mentally, you know, certain things they say, and it rocks your inner core [*puts fist onto chest*].' He was most moved near the end of chapter 4 when the young Jane, at last free from the tyranny of Mrs Reed's house, decides at the final moment not to leave without saying what she thinks of her treatment under that roof:

> Mrs Reed looked up from her work: her eyes settled on mine, her fingers at the same time suspended their nimble movements.
>
> 'Go out of the room; return to the nursery,' was her mandate. My look or something else must have struck her as offensive, for she spoke with extreme though repressed irritation. I got up; I went to the door; I came back again; I walked to the window across the room, then close up to her.
>
> *Speak* I must: I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn: but how?

Jack loves it that Jane does manage to find her voice: 'Once she knew she was gonna go, she couldn't just be told to go off and [*makes dismissing gesture with arm and hands*] not be heard or anything. So she was on her way out, and then she thought, "No I'm going to tell, to come back and just tell her".' Because she'd been so hurt, 'She feels its impact, and I don't think she thought through whatever she was gonna say but, but she said it.' That is the second chance that literature finds *time* for, to go back even whilst in the midst of going onward. It is the achievement of the girl who is already almost over the threshold and into the future, before she crosses back over it again to do justice to the past. These little oscillating movements contain, like secrets hidden within the apparent continuity, what Henry James calls 'disguised and repaired losses' and 'insidious recoveries'.[12] These can be tiny signs of life looking, backwards and forwards, for some sort of struggling unity with itself.

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And that is part of a larger, wider endeavour here, to do with what the pessimist philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer called the second phase of human life:

> The striving after existence is what occupies all living things and maintains them in motion. But when existence is assured, then they know not what to do with it; thus the *second* thing that sets them in motion is the effort to get free from the burden of existence.[13]

It was the seeking-system in the brain that was the first engine of human evolution, searching the environment for resources necessary to survive and grow, urgently encouraging foraging, exploration, investigation, curiosity, interest and expectancy.[14] Its first-order task was to fight for life, to preserve itself, to gain expansion and resist contraction. But now in our second world, says Schopenhauer, in the social human world which follows when physical survival is more or less guaranteed, the urgent raw fight for life is less obviously needful, and the seeking can shut down. Then this civilized second world becomes more existential and psychological, more concerned with seeking meaning for life than struggling for life itself. At the very point at which basic needs seemed relatively satisfied and readily provided, we become more worried by how the life that is now secured may be actually worth living. That is why Schopenhauer feared that with the closing-down of the primary seeking-mechanism, with the loss of life-and-death actions, the result would be a tamed and passive opposite: melancholy or depression, emotions no longer geared into actions useful for survival but left burdened by an evolved level of inner search for which in the mental domain there was no goal corresponding to survival in the physical. In the second-order social world to which human beings have sensibly adapted, Schopenhauer did not believe in the real possibility of happiness or flourishing.

But *Reading for Life* is about some people's half-abashed, half-defiant search for that 'second thing', even through something as apparently tame as reading. This is why, to take a literary equivalent, all that went into the formation of the realist novel becomes increasingly important in this book. It is not simply because such fiction may seem more 'accessible' to ordinary readers, but because the realist novel—*Great Expectations, Middlemarch, Anna Karenina,* through to *Lord Jim, The Unnamed,* and *The Other Side of You*—marks in literature that immersion in a mundane secular life which may leave the great questions of meaning and purpose awkward and embarrassed, half-abandoned or compromised, and yet never quite avoidable either, to surface in moments of personal crisis.

Books may feel secondary, and at times reading can seem almost shamefully substitutive in relation to a more active, direct, and primary life. But it is worth recalling how this is part of our second task beyond the limit of basic literal needs, in

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the effort to reincorporate and transmute those needs at another level. Literature is still a form of seeking for life, related to what Jack means by finding an 'inner core' as it is revealed by surprised feeling, in an almost physical version of emergent mentality. It is a form that goes on as a second life within the lives of readers featured in the chapters that follow.[15]

As another CRILS associate, the psychologist Professor Richard Bentall says: 'Literary reading is implicit psychotherapy which is all the more effective in relation to existential problems too often ignored by psychologists, because incurable as such.' Or in the words of the novelist in chapter 11, 'There is no cure for life.'

*

A last word on presentation, in which I want to emphasize two issues.

The first issue has been how best in this book to get out and then reproduce its people's voices. As Georgina put it, 'I want to get to the place where it comes from.'

Jud is another of the unknown highly intelligent people described in this book. In his late 30s, he is beset by psychosis, and after quitting university some years ago, has never since been able to get back on track. His group in a psychosis day-care centre in London was reading a short story, 'Mortals' by Tobias Wolff, on a man who announced his own death to the local newspaper in order that he might read his own (brief) obituary. Jud said:

> If you haven't achieved that much and you are not in a good state at the time of your death, what do you put in an obituary? I mean, people are not going to know about your personal workings are they? And the things that matter to you are always left unreported because they're never said, and an obituary is really about society's view of you... It's a stranger's clinical view of your life, based on criteria of accomplishment.

Then Jud adds what actually it is that, also, literature adds to obituary—the need for the inner story, for a more just representation of the neglected, the lost, and the common:

> This man who reported his own death to read his own obituary—he wants to be acknowledged... he wants everyone to know who he was. And then to correct it and say, actually this is what I'm really about... I think he wanted people to know who he really was... and not in the most shallow sense; he just wanted someone to know who he really was.

That correction is literature, is the second thing.

It is also what the novelist Tim Parks points to, when he says how sick he is of received wisdom. So in a mid-life crisis, your friends tell you it will pass, don't do

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anything rash, stick with what you have and see it through. And you begin to think, 'This is just me being unreasonable and immature.' It is a conventional sort of second thought that turns back upon you, its apparently reasonableness making you forget or dismiss your individual first thoughts. The advice of those friends and influences, as before with your parents, takes over your own core voice inside:

> For years you accept the logic of this. For years you seek to attach as little value as possible to your experience. Your unhappy experience. It is in your head. Outside your head, *objectively*, you are well off. Happy even. You have a nice house. Your work is going well, or well enough. And of course there are things like children and financial commitments and reputation.[16]

But this is a false objectivity, a denial of what you feel as it flows from within outwards. To hell with it, is Parks's response: it is a false consciousness that ages you and kills your life. Literature can do better that, can restore the sense of lost primacies.

She, he wants to be heard—as to who they really were. So, in trying to replicate on the page the voices of the participants, as independently as possible, I have had to avoid consistency. I have worked tactically instead—according to local context, sometimes providing indented quotations, at others signalling that the story has given way to the protagonist's own words, with or without quotation marks, in the interests of greater immediacy. On many occasions, the thoughts of the participants then become involved in some further thinking that their situation seems to summon or require, or they lead to reports on the wider research arising (in particular in chapter 7). I should also add: most of the participants are given fictional names; some have wanted their own names used, and where this is so, it is indicated; and in some chapters the leading figure is an amalgam of different real-life readers.

But I said there was also a second issue in terms of the organization of this book, which has to do with why I have avoided a conclusion—for which decision I think there are three main reasons.

It is partly to do with trying to let the individuals in each chapter stand somewhat separately, in their own right, in their own detail, as I have said.

Secondly, it is also to do with wanting it to be the reader of this book who finds which chapters most speak to each other. Certain chapters are perhaps more the story of the poem than the story of its readers: chapter 1 on a Shakespeare sonnet, chapter 7 on Renaissance lyrics, chapter 8 on three short lyrics. Some chapters deal with the same poems or the same authors but with different readers: for example, with 'Invictus' across chapters 3 and 4, or in relation to Elizabethan poetics in chapter 2 and chapter 8, or in recurrent references to Wordsworth or George

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Eliot, Shakespeare or Tolstoy. And as I have already indicated, the readers themselves are significantly different in age, background, and apparent status. For example, even at the level of her tastes, the reader of sophisticated modern American poetry in chapter 5, Frances, is very different from the readers in chapters 3, 4, 7, 8, Lesley, Imelda, Donald, Laura, and Evanna, but closer perhaps to the reader of novels, Georgina, in chapter 9. Then again, certain topics echo across chapters, such as brain-imaging between chapters 4, 5, and 7, and free indirect discourse between 10 and 11. Or you may perhaps find emergent themes such as 'speaking back' that resonates between chapter 1 and chapter 5, or the uses of the negative, linking chapters 1, 7, and 11, or the idea of a future in chapters 6 and 8, in contrast with 10. Throughout there are signs of what arises out of trauma and the loss of innocence, out of depression and the loss of meaning, and the competing claims of religious need and psychological understanding in trying to meet these human difficulties. Amidst the dense and intricate detail of the involvement, I have tried to break up the chapters, to offer pauses and provide a variety of both persons and discourses; but certain chapters may seem to belong more sequentially to those that follow. Chapter 6 explicitly refers back to chapters 1 and 2. The end of chapter 8 on Bunyan seems to me to relate to the different journeys undertaken in chapters 9 and 10, and leads to the end of the book itself through the time-travels of chapter 11.

And yet these are no more than my own suggestions, interests, and impressions, and as I have said, there is a third reason for avoiding a summary conclusion that brings all the chapters thematically together. It is that I have not wanted a glib and pious rounding off on 'the benefits of reading' when the experiences of individuals, still ongoing in development or jeopardy, are more complicated than such a neat summary would allow. Much of the initial material for this book is taken from two research reports, *Cultural Value* funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and *What Literature Can Do* funded by Guy's and St Thomas' Charity, both of which may be consulted on the CRILS website.[17] Those reports do offer headings, themes, findings, and conclusions, the bare bones of which may still be made out in this book, such as: the importance of felt experience in reading, and the value of the specific, the small and detailed, and the individual; shared reading as giving a voice and a language for thought, memory, and emotion; the uses of hesitation, surprise, uncertainty, and creative inarticulacy; the value of so-called negative experiences and apparent inabilities; the awakening of new capabilities such as meta-cognition, reappraisal, and mobility of mind, as against set default patterns and reductive literalism; shared reading as therapeutic without being a programmed therapy; the advantages of explorative induction and the working of the executive mind within genuinely owned neuronal responses from gut or heart, as opposed to

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imposed top-down therapies; the value of the group as warm personal community with literature acting as a social glue; the subtle role of the group leader. Further details on this, on case-histories, and methods, may be found in a different context in a companion volume, *Reading and Mental Health*, edited by my long-standing collaborator, Josie Billington, for Palgrave Macmillan.

Instead of a conclusion I do offer a brief afterword, if only to avoid an opposite danger: the danger of shirking the responsibility of saying how important the reading of literature is, and giving some final overall signals of that. I don't want to be mistaken as believing that people who do not read literature are somehow necessarily lesser than those who do. But I believe that the people who in this book do read, are more for have done so, and that that 'more' has to be stood up for.

I am deeply indebted to all the participants here, hoping I have taken no liberties with their generosity, for theirs are acts of reading worthy of respect and admiration in any setting; to members and associates of CRILS, Josie Billington, Rhiannon Corcoran, Chris Dowrick; Richard Bentall, Christophe de Bezenac, David and Helen Constantine, Geoffrey Crossick, David Fearnley, Grace Farrington, Kelda Green, Arthur Jacobs, Kremena Koleva, Esther Harsh, Elisabeth Hill, Phil Jimmieson, Eleanor Longden, Kathryn Naylor, Brian Nellist, Howard Newby, Rick Rylance, Mette Steenberg, Thor Magnus Tangerås, Erin Walsh, and Megan Watkins; but especially to Fiona Magee who helped conduct a large amount of the research and interviewing contained in these pages; to colleagues past and present from *The Reader*, Eamee Boden, Amanda Boston, Katie Clark, Sophie Clarke, Charles Darby-Villis, Ben Davis, Clare Ellis, Penny Fosten, Eleanor McCann, Kate McDonnell, Angela Macmillan, Alexis McNay, and above all the founder of *The Reader*, my wife, Jane Davis. In the world of publishing, my greatest debt is to Jacqueline Norton at Oxford University Press: there too, Eleanor Collins and Aimee Wright were always of great help. There must be a hundred other such dues and influences over the years, I know, but I hope that somehow the debts, conscious and less conscious, are recorded decently in the content of what follows.

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CHAPTER 1

NO DEFENCE AGAINST THE WORDS—A STORY OF SONNET 29

Reading this poem, said Keith, suddenly felt like 'reading the writing on the wall'. In rehab for alcoholism—he is in his forties, and at his worst would drink two bottles of whisky a day—he couldn't turn away from the sight of the words before him.

The original for writing on the wall comes from the Book of Daniel at the feast of Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon.

> They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.
>
> In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.
>
> Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him…
>
> Daniel 5:4–6

Yet the king could not tell what the writing said and called for the wise men of Babylon to interpret it, but they could not. Then his queen told him of a Jewish holy man who many years before had served his father, King Nebuchadnezzar. It is Daniel who is brought forth, only to confront the king with the facts of his drunkenness, sexual debauchery, and worship of false gods: 'and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified' (5:23). He then reads aloud the text on the wall which is in Aramaic—'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin', words to do with currency, weights, and division:

> This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.
>
> TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.
>
> PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.
>
> 5:26–8

Then, in that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain.

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It is like the famous lines written by the twelfth-century Persian poet in *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, as translated by Edward FitzGerald between 1859 and 1872:

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

What is inscribed in the book of life, even by your deeds, cannot be erased. It is read with a shudder.

The poem Keith saw inescapably on the page in front of him was Shakespeare's sonnet 29, read aloud in a shared reading group set up in a London drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre:

> When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
> I all alone beweep my outcast state,
> And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
> And look upon myself and curse my fate,
> Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
> Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
> Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
> With what I most enjoy contented least;
> Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
> Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
> Like to the lark at break of day arising
> From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate:
>   For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
>   That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Unlike the king in the Bible, the recovering alcoholic did not need any interpreter or translator beyond himself. The line that first almost literally hit him, Keith says, was '*Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising*': 'That's the one that really strikes.' It was like seeing so much of what he had previously been doing and thinking, now 'in the light of day'. One of the women in his group thinks there is a bit of hope, a chink of possibility, in that 'almost'—not completely despising, leaving the tiniest space for what 'haply' may bring later in the poem. Keith doesn't think that. He thinks 'almost' is like a sort of terrible gulp on the brink of the next word that can hardly be brought out for being so terrible: 'almost - despising myself'. And he also thinks how impossible it is wholly and truthfully, 100 per cent, to despise yourself, because you who are doing the despising have still to remain being the despised person—unless, that is, you commit suicide. Keith has tried that twice, we learn later.

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He admits this during an interview while he watches excerpts of the session from a video recording:

> **You read it and it strikes home. I wanted to deny that line when I first read it: I wanted to think that I didn't really despise myself. But… [*he sighs*] no…I did despise myself, and half wanted to and half wanted not to. So now when I see these things in print, they strike home. And once you become aware of something, you cannot turn back, you can't *un*know.**

'Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.'

There is nothing more characteristic of the most heartfelt responses in Shared Reading than that use of the double negative: 'You cannot unknow.' Oona, from another group, reading lines from the American poet Dorianne Laux, 'For the Sake of Strangers'—'No matter what the grief, its weight,/ we are obliged to carry it'—says of her own reluctant feeling of having to carry the burden of widowhood: 'I'm afraid I know that. I can't say I don't know that because I do.' *I cannot say I don't* is how readers may have to approach what lays bare their hurt, backing into it with all the value of what is soberly surprised and almost involuntary. So Keith: 'You can't unknow. When I see these things in print…' It is the very print in its external permanence that 'strikes home', as though something vulnerable and unformulated, hidden away in private behind the reader's forehead, had suddenly appeared, undeniable, in front of his eyes. It is not only the apparently external objectivity of the thing, nor its near-physical effect on the psyche. That word 'home' is also ruefully vulnerable in this context, as though something of yours had come back from a different place for admission to its own again. You try unconsciously to leave some of your worst acts out there in the world to fade away amidst all the other stuff that is happening there, and be forgotten, says Keith: as much as you can you leave the bad things behind you in the past. And then one day they return upon you, come home to roost as we say. Shame and guilt come in, and you think how much you've wasted. That return is what reading can be when you see it written out almost publicly like that.[1] It reflects back on you, like a secret private message just for you:

> … in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
> I all alone beweep my outcast state,
> And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
> And look upon myself…

You *look upon yourself* (line 4), says someone else in Keith's group, but also *through [other] men's eyes* (line 1). That is how it becomes the shame of 'myself almost

on from repeated learned responses such as 'Speaking as an addict', or 'This is like addiction'. Through the poetic triggering of sudden feelings and memories, the aim was to stimulate a wider and more spontaneous human discourse that freed people from the set vocabulary of cases in therapy or conditions in recovery. When at that moment the group leader dared to speak like an equivalent bungler herself, the situation was no longer to do with addiction. If in some sense the poem does not care about what feelings it may be responsible for engendering as long as they are alive and felt, it is also that the poem does not know or care whom it is addressing, there are no 'cases'.

Back in the Liverpool rehab unit, a different group leader latches onto another single line:

> Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
> With what I most enjoy contented least

'This may come as a surprise to you,' she confesses, laughing, 'but I really love *reading*!' (And the men laugh too, feigning incredulity because, as they say, what they have really loved are drugs and alcohol.) 'Yes, I know it's a bit of a shocker . . . But I went through a time in my life when I suffered a lot of anxiety and I got to the point when I couldn't read. Then the sight of the books made me more unhappy than anything else.' It leads another group member to talk how he loved to take his dog for a walk, and though his dog is still allowed with him in the centre, all he can do is take him for little walks just round and round the institutional garden. 'And I hate it. The same thing over and over again, the repetitiveness. And I used to love it. And I feel the difference.' That is when a person becomes aware of his or her own separateness: when what once made you happy now makes you sad; when something happy in a poem causes sadness in its reader; when mixed feelings do not allow planned and simple responses. On the films the team can almost see and hear at such moments a person's inner sense of individuality, of individual experience, as though the innermost part that recognizes the contrasts and contradictions is what the reading helps to release. Crucially, in the act of reading that higher centre of awareness is generated from below upwards, as a consequence of something no longer able to be easily or automatically integrated by cognitive efficiency. The short-term 'best guess' or 'good enough' description will not do, and the survival-based drive for it is over-ridden by a need to get closer to the heart of things. Keith speaks of almost being forced to the level at which you can actually see what you're thinking, and what you have been doing, rather than just staying in your general feeling about life. It is what the psychologists call the creation of a meta-level of

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