The Sonnet and the Student in the World

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A reading group has gathered for its weekly session at a day care centre in London for older people living with dementia. The session has ended. Everybody is getting ready to go home, saying their goodbyes. Ava says: It’s a beautiful poem. Absolutely lovely? and begins to re-read, calmly but with animation, the poem with which the session finished, William Wordsworth’s, ‘Composed Upon Westminster Bridge’ (1802).

Earth has not anything to shew more fair:

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty:

This City now doth, like a garment wear 4

The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

All bright and glittering 8

‘I think it’s beautiful,’ Ava repeats, smiling broadly.

in the smokeless air.

Never did sun more beautifully steep

In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;

Never saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

The river glideth at his own sweet will: 12

‘Oh that’s lovely’ Ava interjects, again.

Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;

And all that mighty heart is lying still!1

‘Very beautiful,’ she says. The group applaud. ‘Every time you read it, it becomes more beautiful. Lovely poem.’ Beatrice, another member of group, says, ‘Sometimes you have something and you don’t know what you have got - until after. Sometimes afterwards you realize it’s precious. And we have got it in our hands. And we didn’t value it that much’. ‘Yes,’ says the group leader. ‘As the poem says “people … could pass by”’.2

In a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, a weekly reading group composed of men aged 20 to 70, is reading Shakespeare’s sonnet 29.

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 –3 4

The group leader re-reads, slowly, the first four lines.

Brian: ‘In disgrace with fortune.’ His life could have collapsed for some reason or other. ‘In men’s eyes … all alone’ - he’s isolated, thinking of what he’s been through. My outcast state – the state that he’s in that he doesn’t wanna be. This man’s in pain.

Stuart: The language is quite strong isn’t it. In disgrace. It’s not just in men’s eyes, but with Fortune.

Les: ‘Trouble deaf heaven’. It’s not ‘I talk to heaven, I reach out to heaven’; he knows he’s a ‘trouble’, feels he’s troubling heaven even though he’s crying. He knows himself it’s pointless. Heaven’s not answering – not even listening.’

Brian: ‘It’s like he doesn’t feel he’s worth troubling heaven.’4

These instances of the sonnet’s being read outside of English Literature classes and university tutorial rooms, with people who are typically not literature students, but most often non-readers – beginners - is the work of UK national charity, The Reader.5 There are approximately 400 groups currently, many of them delivered in health or mental health contexts – hospitals, GP surgeries, clinics. One of the tasks of the research centre where I am based (Centre for Research into Literature, Reading and Society, or CRILS, University of Liverpool) is to demonstrate, through collaboration with colleagues in Psychology and Medicine, the value of literary reading within mental health services to (often initially) sceptical mental health care providers.6 The excerpts above are from transcribed video-recordings of reading groups which we have analysed and used as the basis of interviews with participants about their experiences.7

But it should not perhaps be surprising that the sonnet as a form works so well within mental health settings. For the form originated within the English literary tradition precisely as a ‘stay’ amid human trouble. Samuel Daniel in his *Defence of Rhyme* (1603) writes of rhymed verse as a second creation:

The body of our imagination being as an unformed chaos without fashion without day, if by the divine spirit it be wrought into an orb of order and form, is it not more pleasing to nature, that desires a certainty and comports not with that which is infinite, to have those closes, rather than not know where to end or how far to go, especially seeing our passions are often without measure.8

For Daniel, rhymed verse offered small mental worlds formed out of chaos, ‘whose known frame hath those due stays for the mind, those encounters of touch, as make the motion certain though the variety be infinite being far more laborious than loose measures’.9 Daniel does not seek to wish away distress or trouble but to allow its incorporation into a structure, an expressive holdfast, which contains its otherwise loose or infinite measure. The language used by the men in the drug and alcohol recovery programme – collapse, isolation, pain, pointlessness, worthlessness – is not only held by the ‘frame’ of the sonnet whose language it echoes: disgrace, all alone, outcast, bootless cries, trouble deaf heaven. The atmosphere in which this language is produced is not itself one of pain or breakdown but the reverse: this is a moment of serious human attention to serious human matters. Like Beatrice’s catching up, at the end of the session, with something ‘precious’ that might have been missed, lost or passed within it, these moments seem themselves precious human achievements. As with Ava’s felt joy as she read aloud the Wordsworth poem, something is found or recovered which is in imitation of the sonnet’s mission to create perfection against the dark of time, the closure of final endings, the chaos of disordered mentality. The power of the sonnet in this respect seems precious indeed in the case of Ava, who, when she witnessed this moment on video film, had no knowledge of who she was.

Over the past decade, I have involved undergraduates in the outreach work of The Reader. The first small experimental project, funded by the Higher Education Academy, placed 15 English Literature students as assistants to Reader groups delivered in community settings, homeless hostels, asylum centres, mental health day care, and neurological rehabilitation wards.10 A second phase of this initiative, supported by a University of Liverpool Knowledge Exchange fund, placed students in dementia care homes, reading one to one with elderly people, and in local and regional schools, sharing books with children who were struggling emotionally and socially as well as educationally.11 These projects laid the basis for a new Level-3 English module, ‘Reading in Practice: Dissertation’, combining ancient and modern discourses on literature and health, and requiring students to translate their literary knowledge into real world contexts. This curriculum initiative evolved into a School-of-the-Arts-wide Work Placement module and both Medical and Psychology students are now involved in The Reader’s work as volunteers or as part of their formal study.

In setting going these projects, the employability agenda was not my priority. Nor, indeed, was it that of the students. Myself, I was motivated by wanting students both to read more and to have a renewed sense of the value of their subject. Students, for their part, characteristically wanted ‘to give something back’ to the community, to ‘make a difference’, and were overwhelmingly committed to handing on the ‘gift’ of reading to others. They were inspired by their own love for books, or by the memory of some one person who had ‘sparked’ that passion; or, alternatively, they were impelled by first-hand experience of reading deprivation: ‘The placement encompasses everything I would have loved as a child - someone to read with me and to steer me towards good books’.12 Students were very grateful for the often unexpected ways in which the volunteering helped prepare them for life beyond university: learning, as one student put it, ‘to improvise, to be intuitive, to *do* when there is no time to think’.13 But in all cases, students’ recognition of what was to be gained instrumentally in the way of transferable skills (leadership, communication, adaptability, broadened social awareness), was superseded by an impressive idealism and generous sense of citizenship and public service.14

More impressive still was these students’ ability to transmit the vital power of literary text as well as to feel that power more dynamically for themselves. Here, then, is an example of the student and the sonnet together in the world.

Over a period of three months, Naomi, a third-year student taking the Reading in Practice module, visited a care home and read one-to-one, for up to thirty minutes, with several of the residents. She read short poems exclusively, where tightness and compression of language, as well as formal structure (rhythm and rhyme), have been shown to help stimulate and maintain concentration.15 Naomi recounted in her dissertation the difficulty she had experienced in getting beyond the most basic levels of conversation - where interaction was possible at all - with one resident, Grace. Prone to dramatic mood swings, from liveliness to sudden depression, Grace would occasionally cry and become distressed. Naomi came to realise that these emotions were often more reflexes than personal feelings – damaging though they surely were to Grace’s wellbeing: ‘Although I spent a significant amount of time with Grace, I learnt nothing about how she actually *felt.* If I asked her how the poetry made her feel, she would laugh or sing or sigh. There was always a distance between us, as many of the care-workers themselves felt, as they struggled to engage and understand her.’ The first signs of breakthrough came when Naomi read Oscar Wilde’s short lyric ‘La Fuite de la Lune’.

As I read, Grace became silent and still. At the end of the poem she turned to me and said, in a very low, calm tone, ‘That’s lovely that is, really.’ She was extremely taken with the line ‘a dreamy peace on either hand,’16 and she asked me to read it for her again, after which she shook her head and calmly explained to me that peace isn’t something that fits in a person’s hand. ‘You can’t have peace in your hand, it’s got to be in here,’ and she pointed to her heart. When I asked her did she feel peace in there, she told me that she hadn’t for a long time. Whether or not Grace had found peace and calm while reading this poem, she was focused and astute the whole time. It’s as though the poem channeled all those over-sized emotions that she had been struggling with, ‘fitting’ them into a space small enough for brief contemplation of them.

A few weeks later, Naomi read Christina Rossetti’s ‘Remember’:

After a few minutes she turned to me and putting her arm on my shoulder she said: ‘Everybody needs to cry sometimes. I’ve cried and if you need to cry right now I’ll put my arm around you.’ Believing that I was speaking in the first-person about my own sorrow, Grace was teaching me about life, and what she felt I would have to face sooner or later. She wanted me to be prepared; she wanted to use her life and experience to do something good. She went on to tell me that I shouldn’t be afraid of ‘darkness and corruption’17 that ‘everybody gets those’. What was special about this instance was that Grace was no longer a resident of a dementia care home, but an older experienced woman giving a younger woman advice by drawing on her own experience. She was able to reclaim a part of her own identity, to become herself again for a short time.

A sonnet, says Daniel, remakes the world. Here, through sharing the sonnet, Grace remakes herself. Grace is only conventionally mistaken in understanding the ‘I’ of the poem to ‘belong’ to Naomi. For the ‘I’ of the sonnet does indeed belong to whoever speaks it in the new moment of reading. ‘The lyric itself is a choric or group thing. It is a representative “I” which does not seek individuality or novelty so much as re-embodiment each time it is performed’.18 Carrying echoes from across time and space, the sonnet is something like a generic individual, at once a single voice and resonant on behalf of everyone. So Beatrice, in response to Wordsworth’s sonnet, recalled her first arrival in London from the Caribbean – the city cold, she said, yet ‘glittering’ - in the 1950s. So a medical student spoke of her own adolescent struggle with depression when she witnessed a young woman moved by Christina Rossetti’s sonnet ‘We lack, yet cannot fix upon the lack’19 to describe the loss of her teenage-hood through anorexia. This is what the poet Wendell Berry meant when he called literature ‘a meeting-ground’.20 The sonnet’s function as a repository for experience is all the more necessary where ancient forms of communal discourse, especially of joy or sorrowing – feasts, festivals, church, temple, prayer – often lack a modern equivalent replacement. The concentrated dosage of the sonnet, its tightness and formalized structure, offers a ‘container’21 for inward pain that is otherwise private and often humiliatingly belittling.

Indeed, the experience of participating in and/or witnessing shared reading enables students to re-learn not only the emotional power, but the technical structure of the sonnet in a new, more primary way. For example. Towards the middle of the session on Shakespeare’s sonnet in the male rehab centre, group members, at the invitation of the group leader, each read in turn, as if in re-creation of the sonnet’s form, the three quatrains and the final couplet. (I take up the poem here from the second quatrain):

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; 8

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: 12

For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with kings.22

‘It’s interesting that word wealth,’ says the group-leader. ‘“For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings.”’ ‘Reminds me of “Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,”’ says Brian, who re-read the final couplet. ‘Yes, “rich” and “hope,”’ says the group leader, ‘don’t always go together. Have you noticed the other word on the same line as “wealth”?’ she asks. ‘“Love,”’ says Brian. ‘Are you loved because you’re wealthy,’ he asks, ‘or wealthy because you’re loved? Doesn’t have to be gold. Could be a feeling.’ Then Don, who read the penultimate quatrain, notices the key shift of the poem:

Don: It’s gone from wanting to go to heaven, praying to go to heaven and heaven’s not listening to ‘Like to the lark at break of day arising/*From* sullen earth’. ‘Sullen’ is down, depressed isn’t it? Your head’s done in.

Group-Leader: Shall we stay with that? What’s the feeling there. Imagine …

Don: It’s the singing isn’t it? Birds singing. (General and warm vocal agreement.) Beautiful singing.

George (who has not spoken until now): And a change of heart.

Group-Leader: Change of heart?

George: I’m not being soft but if you get up on a cold winter’s morning, and hear a robin outside your window, it is - lifting.

Nick (another new voice): Peaceful.

Group-Leader: Where are you feeling the peace, Nick?

Nick: I think it’s in your voices. (Appreciative laughter.) But it does feel more peaceful at the end than at the beginning.

Don: His state of mind now is like a lark singing.

The point here is not that this is a great model of literary criticism. But when I have shown this video-recording to students, they, too, have recognised the change in the men’s voices – ‘gentler’ and more ‘together’, ‘in harmony’, as one student put it. George’s brave intervention (‘I’m not being soft but …’) happens in immediate response to that shift, as the men both find and make a new tonal register and emotional atmosphere in intrinsic relation to their shared reading of the poem. ‘Soft’ changes status within this group almost simultaneously with ‘wealth’ and ‘love’ changing theirs within the poem. The constituent elements remain the same: one’s relation to them changes. This central message of the poem is itself re-created and re-formulated in the course of the group-reading, not as an abstraction but as a personal recognition and achievement. ‘It’s about making peace,’ says Stuart, ‘not with heaven, but with yourself, here and now, while living life. We need that in our situation.’ What is modelled here for students – and for everyone – is how the sonnet, when read caringly today, can become again what it was when first written long ago: a place of mental-emotional orientation and of vital human discovery.

1. Wordsworth, W. (2010) *21st-Century Oxford Authors,* ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 236.
2. This group was recorded as part of a study of Shared Reading commissioned by Guy’s and St Thomas NHS Trust. See Davis, P., Magee, F., Koleva, K., Tangeras, T. M., Hill, E., Baker, H., Crane, L. (2016) *What Literature Can Do* (Liverpool: Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society, University of Liverpool). <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/instituteofpsychology/researchgroups/CRILSWhatLiteratureCanDo.pdf> N.B. All participants (whose contributions have been video-recorded and transcribed in accordance with NHS/RCUK ethical guidelines in respect of informed consent) are referred to using pseudonyms.
3. Shakespeare, William (1999), *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint,* ed. John Kerrigan (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.), p. 91.
4. This group was recorded as part of a current AHRC-funded study, Co-creating online literary resources for reader volunteering, AH/144436.
5. See [www.thereader.org.uk](http://www.thereader.org.uk)
6. See for example, Billington, J., Davis, P., & Farrington, G. (2013) Reading as Participatory Art: An Alternative Mental Health Therapy, *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 5(1), 25-40. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jaac.5.1.25_1>; Billington, J., Farrington, G., McDonnell, K., Lampropoulou, S., Lingwood, J., Jones, A., Ledson, J., Humphreys, A. L., & Duirs, N. (2016a) A comparative study of cognitive behavioural therapy and shared reading for chronic pain*, Journal of Medical Humanities,* 43(3), 155-165. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2016-011047>
7. Longden, E., Davis, P., Billington, J., Lampropoulou, S., Farrington, G., Magee, F., Walsh, E., & Corcoran, R. (2015) Shared Reading: assessing the intrinsic value of a literature-based health intervention, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 41(2), 113-120. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2015-010704>
8. Daniel, S. (1603) ‘A Defence of Rhyme’ in *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism* (2004)ed. G. Alexander (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.), p. 216.
9. Daniel, p. 213.
10. See Billington, J., Sperlinger, T. (2011) Where Does Literary Study Happen? *Teaching in* *Higher Education*. Special Issue *Leaving the Academy*, 16(5), 505-16.
11. See Billington, J. (2016b) An Evaluation of the ‘City of Readers’ student volunteer initiative at the University of Liverpool (Liverpool: Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS), University of Liverpool).
12. Billington (2016b) pp. 26-27, 29, 35.
13. Billington (2016b), p. 34.
14. Compare Clare Holdsworth and Jocey Quinn (2010) ‘Student volunteering in English higher education, Studies in Higher Education, 35:1, 113-127, which found ‘instrumental motives for student volunteering … emerging as a dominant discourse’, p. 120.
15. Billington, J., Carroll, J., Davis, P., Healey, C., & Kinderman, P. (2013) A Literature-Based Intervention for Older People Living with Dementia *Perspectives in Public Health*, 133(3), 165-173, p. 166. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1757913912470052>
16. Wilde, O. (1997) *Complete Poetry,* ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford; Oxford University Press), p. 131.
17. Rossetti, C. (2001) *The Complete Poems,* ed. R. W. Crump and B. S. Flowers (Oxford; Oxford University Press), p. 31.
18. Davis, P. & Billington, J. (2016). The Very Grief a Cure of the Disease. *Changing English,* 23(4), 396-408, p. 405. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2016.1194188>
19. Rossetti, p. 348.
20. Berry, W. (1991) ‘The loss of the University’, in *Standing on Earth: Selected Essays*, ed. W. Berry, 182-202 (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press), p. 184.
21. For expansion of this idea of literature as a ‘container’ in Wilfred Bion’s sense of the word, see Billington, J. (2016) *Is Literature Healthy?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch 1, pp. 13-46 and p. 90.
22. Shakespeare, p. 91.