

## ***A MANIFESTO FOR CRILS***

The unit for research into reading that we set up in Liverpool is just over a year old now. It is called CRILS – the Centre for Research into Reading, Information and Linguistic Systems. Odd though perhaps it may seem at first, we came out of a department for the study of English literature and into a faculty of Health and Life Sciences, to widen our remit across disciplines and in relation to the world outside.

### **What do we do there?**

Part of what we do, in collaboration with psychologists, health professionals, sociologists and statisticians, is seek to evaluate the outreach work of The Reader Organization, the shared reading-aloud of literature that goes on in groups created everywhere and anywhere - within libraries, prisons, drug-rehabilitation centres, dementia care-homes, schools, and so on. If what we call The Reading Revolution is to take its place in the national agenda and win both support and funding, then it is vital that its claims are rigorously tested by both qualitative and quantitative analysis. That means questionnaires, interviews, transcripts, recordings and filmings, brain-imaging, control trials, measures of well-being, graphs, calculations of costs and savings – a mixed methodology.

But it is equally important that the individuals within the unit keep coming back to their own reading and writing. Otherwise we become merely second-order specialists, thinking all too generally *about* reading rather than thinking within it. Reading is not simply an activity for its own sake any more than books are self-enclosed objects: the process and the text alike give way to the content, the meaning and the purpose, the life of thought and feeling they serve to create and imagine. So, for example, I am working on a new series for Oxford University Press called *The Literary Agenda*, on what reading literature should mean in the twenty-first century, with very specific examples; Josie Billington is continuing her work on the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning with an edition to follow up on her recent book *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Shakespeare*; Paul Watry is working on the digital technology of the future and on the understanding of complex data.

Still, we have recently been asking ourselves to ponder a large statement made by an early twentieth-century researcher Edmund Huey who travelled the United States investigating the teaching and practice of reading:

*And so to completely analyze what we do when we read 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.*

We aim to increase the status and understanding of literary reading as an emotionally exploratory area for thinking, in ways that are often both unrecognized within the formal study of literature and under-rated in the wider world. The question we have been asking ourselves is how to do 'research' into reading that would be exciting, imaginative, and meaningful, not merely generalized, or dry, or pious. Here are some preliminary notes and attempts at an answer.

## Background

'Research' in the humanities characteristically has to do with editing the work of an author, or writing a biography or study, but mainly arises out of ideas emergent from within the human texture and situation created inside the books. That these ideas might be susceptible to experiment, testing and proof is not the conceptual or disciplinary norm as it might be in science.

What adds to the difficulty is something like a serious historical embarrassment. That is to say, academic literary study is too often now a rather self-enclosed place of specialization – the more ironic since its subject-matter, literature itself, is the very opposite in its reach and purpose. CRILS exists in counter-response to that process of division of labour and the specialization of separated disciplines which has gained ever-increasing momentum from the nineteenth century onwards. Its main argument is that literature serves as a central human reservoir or holding-ground for meaning and for uncertainty, in resistance to those tendencies towards separation, alienation and dispersal. It is important that literary people and literary reading-groups exist such that their very existence represents a challenge to demarcation. Nonetheless it is awkward that the content of the study of literature - which previously might have been a part of religion, then a part of morality, then a part of education - is now given its best chance as part of health and well-being. But literature is not simply 'healthy' or even 'therapeutic', though it does enable thoughts to be thought that would not otherwise find a place for themselves as proper subject-matter within a specific discipline.

Perhaps this historical shift does not matter too much; human content must exist within whatever forms it can and seek transcendence from within them. That potential transcendence is one of the objects of study: content over form (albeit realized through form), individual over limited or damaged situation, reality over institutional framework, primary detail over secondary categories.

The real question may be how far, as an exploratory and meditative holding-ground for human meaning, the reading of literature can become some kind of modern collaborative successor to the purposes of dogmatic religion, or formal philosophy and practical psychology.

What to do, in order to think harder about these matters?

### *Question 1: What really happens when we read?*

Wordsworth spoke of remembering *how* he felt at a particular time, but *what* exactly he felt he did not recall. Attention in reading may be directed towards the 'what' of the text, but the exploratory and meditative process that goes on in the background is arguably just as important though probably less conscious. The 'how' of reading may be not just an instrumental means to an end but an intrinsic part of an experience, a way of thinking and a place for thinking that the world does not usually create or encourage.

What mental processes are involved that make immersed reading in serious literature different from ordinary thinking? (Including here the relation of emotion to thought in the moment, as part of recovered human wholeness). Is there such a thing (a function of being) which may be called 'a reader' - a searcher for meaning, say?

Trials can do something towards comparing reading a newspaper, a self-help book, and a literary work. There is some empirical evidence to show that slowing of reading is involved here and David Miall (and others in what is known as empirical aesthetics) have shown that distinctive literary features regularly produce that slowing effect even amongst readers without a strong literary background.

- a) *Transcripts* from the reading-groups rely as much on the literary analysis of human discourse as do the texts the reading groups are actually looking at, in order to discover the transient quality and unexamined nature of the encounter. These transcripts take us very close to the momentary reality of what is actually happening but with the added dimension of time for reflection. It is possible to identify breakthroughs as well as resistances and missed opportunities; the intuitive development of mental tools; indicators of change or suddenness of realization. As far as I am aware, no one else is doing this work in this particular area.
- b) *Brain-imaging experimentation* into the relation of syntax in front of one's eyes to the shift and configuration of mental pathways behind them. The shape and motion of an utterance of emotional importance may have a powerful effect in preventing the hardening of mental arteries, the re-enforcement of set opinions and agendas in isolation from immersion in the praxis of contingent human existence. It is argued that literature is the best model we have for the raw unpredictability of such existence – not that literature is itself uncontrolled, unmediated and raw but that within its structures is created the dynamic for the generation of rich complexity beyond obvious preconceptions.
- c) *The experience of sudden 'called-for' thoughts.* The Victorian fantasy writer George MacDonald praised Wordsworth not so much for his ideas as for locating the place (in nature, in mind, in a specific human situation) in which the thoughts arose. The creation of such a place, like a saturated solution of meaning in a crucible so to speak, is what literature does as its own version of experimentation. That means that thoughts are not like the dry residue of experience, are not static knowledge ready to be employed to categorize a situation: in literature such preconceptions have to be kept to the back of one's mind, forgotten unless triggered and activated again with appropriate modifications arising out of the immediate specifics. Thoughts must arise out of felt need, out of sudden excited recognition or new configuration, in some relation between a very specifically testing situation and the tacit store of mind in immersed response. This is like the sort of counselling session envisaged by the psychoanalyst Bion in *Attention and Interpretation*, where nothing should be taken-for-granted - only here the reader is more freely his or her own therapist prompted to take different and varied relations in relation to himself or herself (or other implicatingly imagined selves), and finding inner voices operating tacitly between self and book, through the interactive triggers of the text.
- d) *The power of the language.* In comparison with a non-literary language which is simply instrumental/informative/opinionated. What does the power of a literary language do, in terms of resonance, of surrounding but not explicitly spoken thoughts which nonetheless get into the reader's head when the reader is imaginative?

*Initial action-point:* We are currently applying for grant to compare reading a literary work with reading a self-help manual (on, say, depression) or a newspaper, all within group-settings.

The hypothesis is that:

- a) Literary reading is implicit psychotherapy, all the more effective in relation to existential problems (which are too often ignored by psychologists because incurable as such) for *not* providing a cure in terms of 'self-help'.
- b) Current-affairs discussions arising out of newspaper-reading would be arguably less deep, more opinionated in advance and contentious rather than socially and humanly binding and deepening.
- c) Literary reading serves as a means of actualizing key human concerns emotionally in ways that, for once, let them *out*: offering through the admission of literature a means of handling them (by way of resolving, not solving); a way of gaining experience in what was not initially or always recognized as worthy of the name 'experience', perhaps because too small or humiliating, or too much to do with loss or absence; a means of preventing oneself becoming desensitized to such matters.

**Question 2:** *How is it possible to do research into both the existential models and the existential environments that reading literature creates, as alternative worlds?*

Some remarks above should have provided indicators that characterize the literary experience (though of course we are aware that this is our version of such an experience and there are others): e.g. not knowing in advance; slowed deep thinking in intrinsic relation to personal emotion and intuition; melting-pots or saturated solutions full of more than allows for stereotyped response; the text not as a two-dimensional manual but more like a living presence or person that means something not easily summarized or dismissed; the transcendence of meaning.

In the course of our work we in CRILS find ourselves interested in one thing existing inside its apparent opposite. That is to say, we are interested in settings, mental and social, which being safe defend *unsafe* thoughts and allow them to be held. Or again, where lost primary realities in their rawness and naivety – for example, the need to find speech, to cry out or confess, or the need for counsel, support or kinship – can find properly secondary forms such as literature in which to have presence again even amidst further complications and subtleties. Most of our reality is habitual, blindly normalizing, under-emotional, and not as safe as we suppose in terms of the needs and pains it represses as the price of keeping going. The creation of a mental place, and within it an imaginatively simulated human model, for a fuller registering of existence and a richer form of human being is the aim here in the broadest sense of health. We cannot get there on our own: we need the booster-rocket of literature to *remind us* of feelings, capabilities, situations, privately repressed realities not generally acknowledged in the current social order. Literature says there are no 'cases': nothing human is alien from me.

The assumption here is that art is not that special in kind, albeit special in degree. 'Poetry' begins in real life-forms when, say, a patient stutters and stumbles amidst words, verbal options, in order to make best sense of his or her problem. Or it begins when a vulnerable thing, which might seem to have no acceptable place in the world, finds a sufficiently strong resistant or compelling language to have it admitted into acknowledged reality rather than dismissed. That is art's hard-earned gift of protection, defence and representation on behalf of the race.

*Initial action-point:* one aim might be to look at moments of breakthrough in reading-groups and by recording (oral/visual), ask participants to reflect upon the session and see if those moments are picked out again by them. This bridges the gap between the micro-level of something suddenly happening in a deep emotional environment and the macro-level of understanding thereafter in the norms of the world.

**Question3:** *Do we need something more than (or after) private reading?*

There is clearly research somehow to be done on the relation of the shared reading (read aloud) model and the internalized voicings of private reading – their differences, the question also as to whether the former can lead group-members back to the latter, and whether it remains necessary even so to continue the community of group-reading.

There are further intricate questions about inner and external reading voices, especially when they're happening simultaneously.

But this is also arguably part of a wider question: how is private reading to have a role in the public, social world? It is easy to see art as an optional extra, as though for leisurely pastime or private consumption by processes of division and alienation. This view is a symptom of that loss of wholeness which literature itself characteristically seeks to overcome. What is more, the transfer of the literary into the real seems to be something a realist literary fiction such as *Middlemarch* implicitly demands of its readers, even when the practical means and process of translation may not be clear.

Literature seeks a place in the world - and a role in changing human being in the world. This may be a practical argument for readers-in-residence as human agents in a number of different settings in a different ordering of humane social provision including education in the modern world, but it is also more than that – namely, the challenge to make literature actively real in its effects upon people.

How can this be a matter for a research or development programme, for experiment or testing? Perhaps we need to help create a model – a building and an environment – for a social centre that transforms libraries, educational facilities, and psychological provision, in practical and physical refutation of skepticism about such idealistic possibilities.

(2,500 words)