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Shared reading as an affordance-nest for developing kinesic engagement with poetry: A case study

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Abstract: This case study explores how the practice of Shared Reading enables readers who normally find poetry difficult to engage with, to sustain and deepen their attention. We regard Shared Reading as a distinct ecology characterised by the invariant features of text, Reader Leader and group members, that affords processes of situated cognition (distributed cognition as communal meaning-making, embodied cognition as somatic-kinesic-visceral-affective processes). This affordance nest enables the creation of meanings in a transpersonal space consisting of moments of pre-reflective felt sense, personal disclosures and negotiations, and transpersonal interactions around the poem and between participants. The premise is that many readers find it difficult to realise what Terence 2016 terms “kinesic reading”, but through distributed cognition, it can be collectively achieved. Building on Longden et al.’s (2015) emergent concept of “creative inarticulacy”, we identify and describe a non-exhaustive catalogue of nine phenomena that emerge in the evolving process of such communal sharing of meaningfulness. Whereas previous qualitative research on Shared Reading has tended to focus on benefits for the individual participant, we hope that a situated cognition approach can uncover new aspects of the practice.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Many readers of literature find poetry difficult to engage with. What is it that readers can do together in a Shared Reading group that they cannot achieve on their own? This article explores, through a case study of one particular session where 8 participants read a contemporary poem, how meaning may be created in a communal space of safety and equality. As the literature is both read aloud and silently and the Reader Leader acts as a non-expert who invites personal responses and explorations, Shared Reading affords participants experiences of collective wondering. It encourages disclosures, negotiations and vicarious feelings of being moved prompted by the responses of one’s fellow readers. Through such experiences the process of sustained attention to the poem is enhanced and deepened, and embodied realisation of meaning is shown to unfold and evolve. Embodiment is manifested as nine different kinesic, visceral and affective phenomena that takes place between participants when distributed cognition is at work.

Subjects: Teaching Practice - Education; Reading, Psychology of; Literature

Keywords: Rune Christiansen poet; shared reading; cognitive poetics; situated cognition; distributed cognition; embodiment; kinesic reading; communal meaning-making; affordance nest; affective experiences; case study research

On a Thursday afternoon in early April, a small group of people are gathered around the table in a room in a public library, having tea and biscuits. Before each member is a copy of a text: a poem by Norwegian author Christiansen (2019). The Reader Leader, who is also the first author of this article, reads the poem aloud:

A wet winter twig

*The snow retreats to the shadows of the trees,
the sky's brass blackens
and all my friends kiss my brow—
are they taking their leave?*

And finally:

*A boy in wellies walks about in the garden,
looking for the ring he lost,
he is neither glad nor wistful*

(translated by Thor Magnus Tangerås)

After a few seconds of silence, the Reader Leader says: “hmm, there is quite a lot to take in here, isn't there ... Let us read it again.” The poem is read once more, slowly, attentively. Then another silence ensues, before—unprompted—someone says: “the sky's brass blackens—I like that image, I can see it so vividly.” Her words are accompanied by hand gestures, as if to indicate a broad vista of a horizon where the sun is setting. The group grapples for a while with the temporal sequence implied in this poem, and speculates about who the speaker is. Someone remarks upon the change in feeling tone from the first to the second stanza, which is picked up and elaborated on by another participant. And then, across the table, one member offers: “I suddenly got this image of myself lying still and a snowdrop's falling on my forehead, I can feel it now”. This intimation seems to open something up in the rest of us: feelings of being deeply moved by this spontaneous offering—as if the whole poem comes fluidly alive through a process of vicarious embodied-kinetic participation in the text-world.

This vignette illustrates processes of situated cognition, i.e., meaning-making as it emerges in cultural practices, encompassing both embodied and distributed cognition and their concomitant affective experiences in an act of Shared Reading. Shared Reading is a specific literary-based practice developed by The Reader Organisation in Liverpool, UK.¹ Small groups, typically consisting of 6–12 persons, facilitated by a leader, meet in order to read literature aloud and share personal experiences. Following certain ontological and epistemological suppositions and procedures (everyone is welcome, safe atmosphere, open discussion is encouraged) participants engage in dialogues around texts situated as “a live presence and emotional centre (as opposed to merely objects of analysis)” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 113). Shared reading is applied in diverse community settings such as prisons, hospitals, psychiatric day-care institutions and homes for elderly and patients suffering from dementia, and also as open groups in libraries, schools or universities (Longden et al., 2015, p. 113).

1. Shared reading and creative inarticulacy

In a research review Dowrick, Billington, Robinson, Hamer, and Williams (2012) conclude that Shared Reading “not only harnesses the power of reading as a cognitive process, but also acts

as a [...] *socially* coalescing presence, allowing readers a sense of subjective and shared experience.” (p. 16; see also Longden et al., 2015, p. 113; our italics). Thus, Shared Reading forms a gestalt in which one may choose to foreground either the social (e.g. Steenberg, 2016), or the aesthetic aspect of literary reading. In either case, the therapeutic benefits of participating in Shared Reading are seen as secondary gains. The primary purpose is the creation of a communal space in which literature can be *experienced*. It brings people together who then experience literary texts as accessible and meaningful.

Although Shared Reading has been the subject of extensive research over the last few years, the majority of studies have focussed on the outcomes and impact of the practice in terms of health benefits (social, cognitive and emotional) and how it may improve psychological wellbeing in both participants more generally as well as specific groups such as women prisoners, people with dementia, chronic pain patients and depressed patients (Billington, Robinson, & Longden, 2017; Davis et al., 2016; Longden, Davis, Carroll, & Billington, 2016; Billington et al., 2017; Billington, Jones, Humphreys, & McDonnell, 2014; 2013a; 2013b; 2012; Dowrick et al., 2012; Davis, 2009). Among these studies, however, are also qualitative studies that combine observations and interviews in order to identify central experiences intrinsic to Shared Reading. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured interviews, Gray, Kemle, Davis, and Billington (2016) found that five “master themes” emerged pertaining to participants’ experience of Shared Reading: (1) “Literature as an Intermediary Object”, (2) “Boundaries and Rules of Engagement”, (3) “Self as Valued, Worthy, Capable”, (4) “Community and Togetherness in Relational Space”, and (5) “Changing View of Self, World, Others”. These themes resonate with those identified by Longden et al. (2015) who also found that the literary text acts as an intermediary object, allowing participants to talk about themselves via characters and to switch attention between the internal and external. Moreover, participants emphasized that there were clear rules of engagement, combined with “liveness” and unpredictability. Togetherness was established in the group through experiencing both sameness and difference. Longden et al. (2015) identified the term “creative inarticulacy” which points to a central feature of Shared Reading, namely, that in the interactions between poem and participants we may observe the translation of inner experience into emergent thinking, which is a collaborative effort: “some moments of the most profound achievement appeared as a ‘relay of thinking,’ wherein members collaborated round the text to share, complete and develop diverse thoughts and perspectives in the manner of passing a baton” (p. 116).

The present article builds upon this discovery of “creative inarticulacy” in order to further identify and describe phenomena of communal meaning-making as afforded by the distinct ecology of Shared Reading. Using the empirical method of observing prototypical interactions in Shared Reading sessions, we have developed a non-exhaustive catalogue of distinct processes of distributed cognition and inter-affective experiences that allow for and enable what Terence Cave (2016) regards as an essential component in attending properly to poems, i.e., “kinesic reading”. We wish to address how the important processes of embodiment in kinesic reading can be facilitated by Shared Reading, enabling readers who normally find reading poems difficult, unenjoyable or of little personal relevance, to engage deeply with poetry. Moreover, this case study represents a new approach to research on Shared Reading. Rather than looking into the health benefits and cognitive gains of individual participants, we study how the communal meaning-making process can open up access to the kinesic-visceral-affective reading resources of group members. We ask: What is it that Shared Reading can accomplish that individual reading cannot?

We open this article by introducing Cave’s concept of “kinesic reading” and discuss why many readers may find it difficult to unfold and utilize it in their interactions with poems. We propose that a particular ecology of socially distributed cognition may facilitate kinesic reading. Next we will identify the distinct affordance nest provided by the ecology of Shared Reading and discuss our ethnomethodological approach. In the main part of the article, we describe nine phenomena that this ecology affords, before we conclude by pointing to some implications of these findings for

future research into the ecology of Shared Reading as a means of opening up for deep engagement with poetry.

2. Thinking with literature: The difficulties of kinetic reading

As a research paradigm, situated cognition denotes the concern with both the bodily and social contexts of human knowledge as it emerges in cultural practices (Morgan, 2017). As such it may be said to encompass both embodied cognition and socially distributed cognition. Although there is no unified theory of situated cognition, the research movement emerged as a reaction against first-generation cognitive approaches that took computation and AI as models and foundational metaphors. For instance, the psychologist Jerome S. Bruner (1990) turns instead to “the concept of meaning and the processes by which meanings are created and negotiated within a community.” (p. 11). Other approaches emphasise the continuity of mind and body, and focus on the embodiedness of cognition in all of its somatic, sensory, interoceptive and kinetic aspects. For instance, empathy is thus conceived not just as the ability to read other minds, but also of using the body’s motor resonances. One of the foremost theorists of embodied cognition in literary studies is Terence Cave.

Cave, in his influential *Thinking with Literature* (2016), places particular emphasis on what he terms *kinesic reading*, i.e., how the body’s motor resonances and the imagination of movement are activated in literary responses, as a central and vital aspect of embodied cognition. Importantly, he states that “kinesic reading brings to the surface something you always already felt when you read the text properly, but somehow ignored for the sake of supposedly ‘higher’, more intellectual and aesthetic pleasures.” (p. 29) We think this formulation is key to understanding why a lot of avid fiction readers find it difficult to engage with poetry.

Linguistic relevance theory pinpoints how two interlocutors unconsciously invest and project an immense amount of information from past experiences, as well as unknown dreams and hopes, in order to try to grasp what the other means (Wilson, 2011). Cave (2016) identifies a significant gap in this theory: the theory of relevance leaves the embodied aspects of the cognitive processes of inference in oblivion. Thus he introduces the idea of kinesic reading precisely to point out how there is a movement in the reading mind where people, scenes, feelings, thoughts come to life, when something happens beyond, but not at all excluding, the cognitive meaning-making in the more restricted sense as a presumed pure intellectual act. He adds that the way of reading he describes in the quote above is precisely a variation of being in the realm of the aesthetic. That he in the quote even seems to state that there is a proper reading of a poem, should in this context not be understood as an authoritarian slip, but rather as a way of saying that in order to gain access to poetry the reader must be willing to enact (p.30) the whole embodied register.

In an exemplary reading of Yeats’ epigrammatic poem *The Balloon of the Mind*, Cave carefully examines how such kinesic moments may come to be, i.e., how if we suppress the habits of intellectually looking to translate imagery into abstract concept, “what emerges above all is the haptic character of the scene that Yeats stages for us: the feel of balloon, the pull on the ropes, the sheer implied awkwardness or friction of the encounter” (p. 35). Thus, the scene is as he puts it felt “within the muscles of the body” (p. 36). Note here the parallels to how haptic qualities are enacted in the vignette to this article.

Cave categorically asserts that “everyone who is willing to attend to Yeats’ poem, to use their kinetic intelligence, will see that” the poem works to produce “a kinetic response.” Based on our own experience as educators, however, we contend that not every reader is able to realise such a somatic (kinetic, visceral, haptic, affective) response. Whether this is because they tacitly presume that kinesic reading should be ignored for the sake of higher intellectual activities of decoding a disembodied message, or because they cannot access their own kinetic-visceral-affective capabilities, is beyond the scope of this article. Of course, it is reasonable to assume that this failure stems from an over-emphasis in educational settings upon decoding hidden

meanings and taking stock of the poet's workshop, i.e., identifying and naming rhetorical devices (e.g. Fialho, Zyngier, & Miall, 2011; see also Fialho in this Special Issue).

When teaching the method of Shared Reading we have observed that even literary scholars can find poetry inaccessible. Many do not read poetry at all. For one of us "A wet winter twig" did not open up as it were until one of the other participants that early April afternoon revealed how he sensed the snowflake falling on his forehead. It was as if his disclosure of this immediate and pre-reflective moment made it possible to feel one's way into, and move about in, the poem. Reading poetry in this sense of feeling an embodied connectedness with the poem seems too hard to get at even for highly competent interpreters. Readers proficient in decoding intellectually layer beyond layer of subtle meanings (i.e. cognitions as defined in first-generation cognitive studies; see Cave, 2016, p. 28) can struggle to feel the embodied connectedness with a poem. They do not seem to have access to, or be capable of utilising, the visceral, haptic, auditive, affective or somatic qualities of the life that poetry may evoke. It might seem as if for these readers the "so called higher conceptual activities" as Cave (2016, p. 30) formulates it, overshadow the other sensorimotor perceptions that they heavily depend on, and operate with, for embodied cognition to be realised.

Following Ellen Spolsky (1993), Cave terms such heightened sensitivities "kinesic intelligence" (Cave, 2016, p. 37). However, in Cave's view, producing such kinesic responses seems not to be a product of a given intelligence, but a faculty depending more than anything on attention and where to engage the attention in "the whole sensorimotor context" (p. 38). And this, we claim, is what we see happening in our Shared Reading episode involving "A wet winter twig". It is as if attention is engaged and directed in a way that facilitates such empirical instances that we in, line with Cave, might tentatively term *kinesic moments*.

Our premise is that the deepening process of attention depends on, and results in, embodied reading, and that the "resistance to poetry" stems in part from a failure to engage in such embodiment and experience kinesic moments. The thesis of this article is that such embodied reading unfolds between and within group members as in a process of socially distributed cognition, wherein cognitive activities are situated within the social settings in which they occur (Hutchins, 1995). In an article aiming to develop an integrated theory of the emergence of distributed cognition, Heylighen, Heath, and Van Overwalle (2003) define distributed cognition as "the confluence of collective intelligence and 'situatedness', or the extension of cognitive processes into the physical environment." (p. 1). It is particularly the element of the confluence of collective intelligence and intentionality that concern us here. What takes place in Shared Reading is not so much a "scaffolding process" between a learner and a knowledgeable peer or instructor, as in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (see also Ellis & Worthington, 1994). Rather, the group proceeds on the basis of communal wondering (non-expertise, non-instruction) to encompass various phenomena of embodied reading. This may be understood as communal meaning-making, or what Di Paolo, Rohde, and De Jaegher (2010) from their enactivist perspective term a "joint process of sense-making", where readers collaborate with each other and with the poem.

3. Shared reading: The fundamentals of the affordance nest

Based on the above, we propose that Shared Reading actually facilitates kinesic moments, eases the way to a real embodied experience of poetry, and even is a place where such experiences may be learnt. In other words, Shared Reading forms a structure of affordances (see also Cave, 2016), an *affordance nest* that provides and encourages embodied reading in a way that is different from solitary reading. Building on Gibson's (1979) definition that highlights the potential uses of an object offered to the living creature, Cave (2016) stresses that by *affordances* we should even include the feature or "object itself viewed in the light of those uses" (p. 48). Thus, for example a wheel can be termed a "multiple affordance" for driving, gears, pulleys etc. (p. 48). Addressing writing rather than reading, he coins the notion of a "distinct affordance-cluster, a new ecology for writers to inhabit, reshape and build on" (p. 58). Although leaning heavily on strong traditions of solitary as well as communal reading dating back to *Lectio Divina* and Augustine as well as to primal story-telling gatherings around the fireplace, we propose that Shared Reading similarly offers a new ecology to inhabit, an ecology that

facilitates kinesic moments of embodied reading. As literature must be understood in terms of multiple, nesting affordances forming part of “an ecology in which individual things collectively form a complex network of reciprocal relations” (Cave, 2016, p. 48), so may the practice of Shared Reading.

In this next section we will attend more closely to the specific “ecology in which individual things collectively form a complex network of reciprocal relations” (Cave, 2016, p. 48). The specific literary affordance nest of Shared Reading may be grasped in terms of its three fundamentals actants—text, Reader Leader and participants—and the invariant features of each.

3.1. Text: Double modality

The specific characteristic of the text as extended cognition in SR is its *double modality*: Each participant has a copy of an unknown text in front of them, and may read it internally. But the text is also read out loud, first by the Reader Leader and thereafter offered to participants. This double modality draws on two primary ecologies/anthropologies of reading: that of people being safely gathered around the table or the campfire to listen attentively to the voice of the storyteller; and that of the child and adult sat next to each other, both looking at the same page and pointing to and sharing thoughts and impressions of the material. This has several implications. It affords the recipient easier attention to the work. Second, the two modes have different rhythms: silent reading is usually much faster, reading out loud is slower. This affords a mutual strengthening, as a less proficient reader thereby is helped to process the text, and a more proficient (academic) reader who is used to reading quickly finds it easier to relax and slow down, to sense poetic qualities and pay attention. Third, the double modality reduces felt social pressure: A participant may find group participation difficult, engaging in eye contact and sharing thoughts. But having the text in front makes it easy to regulate eye contact, as it is perfectly legitimate to look down and concentrate on the text, and there is no pressure to say anything.

3.2. The reader leader: An ignorant schoolmaster

The role of the Reader Leader is to select and prepare texts of recognised aesthetic merit, typically a short story and/or a poem, bring the text to life by reading it aloud in the session, then to initiate dialogue about the literary experience, as well as to manage group dynamics so that all participants are included. This role is marked by two special characteristics. The Reader Leader may be a professional literary scholar, or librarian with specialized knowledge. Although they will select and carefully prepare the reading material, they must attempt to embody a stance of what Rancière (1991) in his reflections on radical pedagogics calls the “ignorant schoolmaster”. This someone who puts their knowledge aside, cultivating an attitude of wonder. The task is not to *explain* the text as if being of higher knowledge, but to keep one’s eyes on the text while reading as well as carefully conduct the participants’ sharing of thoughts, affects, memories, and so forth. Following Rancière, the Reader Leader’s role is to facilitate: to allow participants to appropriate the literature and translate it to their own life-worlds. Investment in particular learning outcomes has to be suspended. Thus, a double suspension is required: of one’s inclination to impart knowledge, and one’s wish to obtain pre-defined outcomes.

3.3. The participants: Come as you are

The participant’s role is marked by two characteristics. Participants do not have to prepare anything in advance. Moreover, speaking is voluntary, no one is pressured to say anything. Even such silent attending is valuable, both to the individual and to the group. Secondly, when responding, the participant may respond either to something in the text, inner promptings, or to comments made by other participants. We call this space “transpersonal” for four reasons: (i) the participants’ roles and personae outside of the group are not significant; (ii) the boundary between text and dialogue about the text is permeable; (iii) both utterances and silences are part of a collective process of attention in which who said what matters less than the process of saying it; and (iv) utterances may also be pre-reflective and non-verbal.

4. Research method

The participatory art of Shared Reading may be said to unfold in the “sweet spot” where the three circles of text, Reader Leader and group overlap and intersect. This is the spot where we tentatively plot out the nine kinesic moments that we address in the main part of this article. In order to plot these moments, we have done a case study on the Shared Reading of the particular poem quoted in our opening vignette.

All case studies spring from the need to develop in-depth understanding through empirical research of a contemporary phenomenon, based on a small set of instances and complex conditions set in their real-world contexts (e.g. Bromley, 1986). This however, is a multiple case study (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010; Thomas & Myers, 2015) synthesising data from several sources. To illustrate the phenomena, we base our narrative report (Polkinghorne, 1995) on an exemplar, the reading of a particular poem as a singular event. “A wet winter twig” serves to exemplify the typical processes that emerge over many sessions. This case study is both descriptive and explanatory (Yin, 2018) in that it seeks to describe what happens/appears in a session of Shared Reading, and it seeks to explicate a theoretical model of the interactions of text and readers.

Although Yin (2018) argues that case study is a research strategy that differs from qualitative research, this study is inspired by four forms of recognised qualitative approaches. We, the authors of the present articles, both had previous experience with Shared Reading as participants and Reader Leaders. One of us is also involved in training new Reader Leaders, thus always looking to improve practice. There is therefore an action research motivation underlying the study, which “aims at changing three things: practitioners’ *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices, and the *conditions* in which they practise” (Kemmis, 2009, p. 463), and which is thus both practice-based and practice-led (Candy, 2006). The study is inspired by ethnomethodology’s focus on the processes of meaning-making that are present in social interactions (Garfinkel, 1967). Thus, the process of meaning-making of the literary text is embedded in a group setting, and the group is formed and created through this practice.

4.1. Design

Part of a series of sessions of Shared Reading with modern poetry, the particular event on which this article is based took place in an open group (drop-in) in a public library in Oslo, Norway. On this occasion there were 8 participants, 6 women and 2 men; two of these members were new, the others knew each other from previous sessions. In presenting the case, we explicitly decided not to give names or numbers to participants, based on our understanding of Shared Reading as a *transpersonal space* in which it is of secondary importance who says what; it is the communal process that is foregrounded.

4.2. Data Collection

In addition to the focal session of this article, several other sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. The second author of this article observed the sessions and took notes. The first author acted as Reader Leader. *Data interpretation*: We analysed transcripts of sessions. Subsequently our findings were compared, and based on these findings, we identified 9 distinct events or phenomena in the particular session on this poem. How did we arrive at this non-exhaustive catalogue? They are abductively-derived phenomena (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002), i.e., they are both found and created. We cannot determine whether they are crystallised from a top-down or a bottom-up process, but they have emerged over time in a hermeneutic circle. Our understanding of the specific characteristics of the roles of Reader Leader, text and group were arrived at through reflection on cumulative experience as manifested in post-session documentation.

5. Kinesic moments afforded by the shared reading ecology

5.1. *Dialectics of orientation: plotting, deviation and reorientation*

The process of re-creation of text-world emerges as a dialectic of attention: oscillating between orientation-seeking and associative deviations. In responding to the lines quoted in our vignette,

questions arise of whether it is morning or evening, winter or even spring. Another member attempts to work out the final line: “neither glad nor wistful”—what is that? Indifferent, just being?”; a third points to “the ring he lost” while a fourth member wonders about what is implied by the word “finally”. Such touchdowns in words, passages and clauses that stand out in one way or another for someone, are always there in Shared Reading, often but not necessarily in the beginning. Altogether this constitutes a joint plotting movement to map the reading and orient oneself and the group as to where to go, how to overview and where to open the text. As told by a participant in a post-session narrative of her experience: “we were like a swarm of bees, each kind of searching in his own way, and then one of us touches down and grasps a word, and all the rest of us follow—we sense, think, look, till someone else once again touches down elsewhere, and we, we follow.”

For each touchdown there may be comments of further thinking ranging from silence and deviations to a sharing of ideas that gives a sense of fulfilment or realisation. Words, sentences and images are put forward into the group for affirmation; not to be agreed or disagreed upon, but as confirming their existence, giving them concrete reality. One could say that while the reading aloud gives life to the experience of the poem—enlivens the text precisely as a temporary phenomenon that rises and fades—the pointing at, gesturing alongside with and repeating of words, phrases and images, are efforts to hold it up, keep it in mind, and get a feel of what happens in the different parts. These efforts to keep the poem in mind will inevitably derail occasionally. In this particular session, there were “irrelevant” associations about different types of wellies and their respective advantages. Although deviations (misconceptions, enduring tangential associations or irrelevant information) can be tiring for the other participants, what is found is that such failures, one-way streets and misreadings may be productive.

Firstly, deviations tend to make others feel *safer*. When someone says something “wrong” or out of place, without being met with ridicule or explanations of how it should be taken or understood, it obviously lowers the threshold for others to contribute. The group must feel that deviations can be valuable detours; therefore, the Reader Leader will acknowledge the contribution and gently return attention to the text. Thus, the “failed” orientation efforts become safety signals. Secondly, they create the possibility for something else, and may lead to serendipities. Deviations are detours, thus changing the place from where we are seeing. In this session, an off-the cuff remark about the inappropriateness of wearing wellies in winter lead another member via associations about seasons and moods to suggest that the poem may be a haiku, thus wondering: “Could it be that it is the twig that is the speaker”? This invited a kinesic reorientation.

“Yes, and ... ”: Building upon another’s response

“It feels like a very definite change in tone from the first part to the second stanza, from melancholic to maybe upbeat”, one of the participants says. It is as if she answers an underlying question thus far not posed in the group about what the poem *feels like*. Another person responds to this presumed shift from melancholia by going one step further, “yes, and ..., yes and that ... that seems connected to the ending, ‘neither glad nor wistful’”. Then a third person responds by turning to the beginning, but still holding the same thought-feeling: “how in the first stanza there are these fading movements, the snow withdraws, the sky withdraws, friends kiss and draw back taking a last farewell, there is darkness spreading—in the second it is more like an image emerging—standing out. The boy in the garden ... So clear.” Before he concludes: “and yes yes ... neither glad nor wistful ... It’s just *being*. Simply to be.” Thus, different tonal qualities are related to moods and to movements to give phenomenal depth to the underspecified affect.

Here we see one way of intersubjective thinking in play. What emerges here is a joint attention to working out what this is by seriously taking up what one person puts forth, holding it up and taking it further, by building on it to see other things. In this joint work one participant obviously depends on another through an intersubjectivity that increases the quality of attention;

strengthens the dialectics of attending to the work in a way that enables it to attend to us. Thus, one person's utterance may form a bridge for another to go further, alternatively it may be understood as a joining of forces in lifting something up into the light, in a collaborative process.

The multiple ways the work allows us to attend to it, obviously facilitated by the many voices speaking, both broaden and "lift" the experience; various perspectives are laid side by side as well as cumulatively build on each other. This way, moods and affects take on "vitality contours": temporal units of experience during which the subjective sense of arousal and activation changes by way of a social microevent (Stern, 2010).

"It is like that, too": accommodating alternative perspectives

What happens, however, when one participant presents a perspective which is different from, or incompatible with, an understanding held by another? In "A wet winter twig" there is clearly a speaking subject, the person kissed by friends. But who is s/he, whose voice is this? In looking closer, the question must be asked. Is it the boy searching for the ring, is he leaving literally? Or is it the boy having grown older, looking back and remembering, while his friends kiss his forehead as a final goodbye? Or could it, strengthened by the fading movements in the first stanza and the strong image in the second, be an old person suffering from dementia who thinks he is a boy again? Or considering the title, is it as suggested above, the twig from which the frozen drops melt and fall, in what then resembles a haiku? All of these perspectives were brought into the group by the participants, without the Reader Leader having prompted them. And all these understandings were allowed to co-exist, as no one seemed to be threatened by competing viewpoints. The phenomenology of this construction may partly be compared to the palimpsest, where layer upon layer transfigure each other. And yet, the point not to be missed is the phenomenological quality of surprise. One participant exclaimed: "Oh, I hadn't thought of that!" This is experienced as a *complimentary* view, a non-exclusionary alternative viewpoint. The participant can then allow herself to entertain this new perspective, to see that there are several ways of conceiving of the situation. Norwegian modernist Tarjei Vesaas formulates this emblematically, in what is both a refrain and a deep logic in his authorship: "Det er slik óg." *It is like that, too*. This is qualitatively different from indeterminacy as defined in classical reader response theory such as that of Wolfgang Iser (1978), where it designates a principle of uncertainty which denies the existence of any final meaning that could bring an end to the play between elements of a text. I *discover* experientially something that was previously hidden from me. This is experienced as rewarding, rather than threatening. Interoceptively, it corresponds to a sense of expansion rather than contraction.

Let us note, however, that instances may occur in which there is a *clash* of evaluations. For instance, if one person is clearly moved by this poem, and speaks in affectionate and personal terms, and another participant then utters pejorative judgments about the poem, then the first person may feel offended or threatened. Because evaluations are not emphasised or encouraged in SR, such conflicts are rare. When they do occur, it is incumbent upon the Reader Leader to intervene to protect the tender feelings of the first person, and simply acknowledge that there is room for different evaluations. Considering how much more prevalent instances of complementarity are in SR, this means that SR may afford the experiential knowing that differences are non-threatening and enriching. Such micro-transformations can potentially transfer onto other aspects of life.

"Hmmm ... ": Markers of musements and ponderings

Sometimes, when participants attempt to feel their way into the poem's language, there will be clear pre-verbal markers of such processes. One of them is the expression "hmmm" or "mmm", a combination of wondering about and "tasting" certain phrases and expressions, accompanied by a deictic gesture, pointing our attention to a particular pulse-point in the poem. The tonal quality of such "hmmms" signals a "thinking aloud" mode rather than a query. In this session, one

participant repeated the clause “looking for the ring he lost”, followed by “he lost ... hmmm ... it says ‘he lost’, it doesn’t say ‘he *has* lost’ I wonder about that ... ”. Then a pause. The participant is on the way to asking about something, but is she asking the poem or herself or the group? Perhaps all, or none. The participant does not seem to require an explanation as to *why* the past participle is not used. Rather, she seems to be exploring the indefinite gap in time and space between the speaking and the experiencing subject in the poem. We call this “musement”: a non-directed query, a pre-reflective question poised between pointing to something and articulating a question. Such ponderings touch upon the core of the phenomenology of wonder: a pre-reflective discovery of something that seems to be of potential significance, and that one must approach carefully. It is as if she takes a “bite” from the text, chews and tastes it, savouring its essence, and then spends time digesting the nature and implications of this experience. This *digesting* happens in the silence surrounding the deixis, a silence which the group holds and supports.

In doing so, she makes two things possible: on the one hand, attention is brought to something “small” that previously passed unnoticed. On the other hand, the tentative way of approaching this something signifies a thinking aloud in which process takes precedence over conclusions. Often it is the Reader Leader who, in a new group, has to model such “hmm”/“mmm” musements. It creates an atmosphere of wonder: we notice things, point to them, are fascinated by them before knowing what they are or what they mean. Fumbling and stumbling are necessary for real thinking to take place.

“The great as if”

One participant again tries out the final line of the poem: “‘he is neither glad nor wistful’ ... ”Then she pauses, and turns her attention inwards. Then she offers tentatively: “it’s like ... it’s as if ... ” and then she pauses again. It is a long silence, nearly 12 seconds. I as Reader Leader marvels at the courage she must have to keep the group waiting for so long. But observing the group, no one seems to get restless; it is as if they are participating in her inner searching. They are holding the space for her, intuitively aware that this is an important moment for her. She is searching for something: the right word, the right feeling. Embedded in silence, and trying her sentence out as if carefully excavating meaning from within, she is enabled to search interoceptively, up against a visceral-affective truth sense, for the right words to express what she is experiencing. This act implicitly communicates to the group: I trust that you will allow me the time and space for this search, your attention enables my search. The poet John Ashbery (1970) speaks of the “great as though” and the “great as if”. The words “as if”, the adverbial subordinating conjunction pertaining to manner, is not just a marker of counterfactual thinking, but also a signpost of searching for an inner felt sense where words fit the feeling or where a feeling fills the words with meaning. After this searching, the participant arrives at the following: “It’s as if ... there is a place beyond good and bad feelings, a place where, or a ring maybe, which holds them all in place.” We see here that in attempting to move beyond good and bad feelings, she picks up again the image of the ring from the previous line of the poem.

5.2. Spontaneous imaginings: vividness and lucidity

In the vignette there are two instances of spontaneous imaginings. One participant has a visceral experience of the visual and kinetic qualities of the metaphor of the setting sun, manifesting in an inward looking, accompanied by non-verbal gesturing. Such immediate engagement not only brings the poem to life for *her*, but breathes life into the poem and into the group, functioning as an invitation to participate in this seeing. In addition to this *vividness* of imagining, which is a translation into viscerality, there may be instances of *lucidity* of imagining. When one member reveals his imagined experience of lying still and receiving a falling snowdrop on his brow, this is more than a translation of a concrete metaphor or one particular image in the poem. This is a clear example of embodied cognition. It seems that he is imagining himself inside the text-world, as if positioning his body horizontally, at the same time in a landscape with trees and snow and on a bed surrounded by friends. He is making his own metaphor that brings together in one pointed

drop several movements within the poem. This is a creative act stemming from a capacity to immerse himself in the visceral and kinetic aspects of the images. It has the quality of lucidity, approaching a dream state where boundaries between self and other is permeable. (Remarkably, in a subsequent Shared Reading of this poem with a different group, another person also indicated an experience of a snowdrop falling on her brow.) Importantly, it even here created an atmosphere of lucidity in the group, allowing others to “dream” the poem into being. Here-and-now, among us, a participant has a visionary experience. Such a spontaneous offering may be regarded as a gift to the group, in as much as it allows vulnerability, lack of self-consciousness, and uncensored experience to emerge and form part of the action and passion of reading. Extending the metaphor, and thus extending the reading of the poem into this article, we may say that this snowdrop brings about a cascade of further drops and affords the experience of what William James (1987) terms “the melting emotions” (p. 220).

5.3. Self-disclosures as ways of opening up the poem: Autobiographic event memories and deep personal concerns

“... A boy in wellies ...”—the woman in her early thirties is clearly moved—her eyes are moist and she speaks in a tremulous voice—“... my son, he’s grown so much, seeing him run around ... he’s the youngest ... I have a girl, she has been there, her kindergarten suit never worn more ... soon he is out of here too—”. The participant’s spontaneous and semicoherent sharing of her life-world, tied as it is to the poem’s imagery, makes the rest of us take part in this deeply personal disclosure. This is an example of an intimation of personal meaningfulness. She has not told a narrative from her own life, but intimates an area of deeply resonant concern in her current life. It requires a certain amount of empathy from the other participants in order to be made meaningful and shared. Gradually the rest of us see more and more come to the surface, and we come to participate in her discovery. We literally take part in her double movement of trying to get in contact with the underlying affect occasioned by the poem, and of trying attempting to share this moment with us. For us as participants these movements seem to take us deeper into the literature, helping us to embody the subjective position represented, as literature and memory give life to each other.

At other times, self-disclosure comes in the form of narrating an episode from one’s life, a personal event memory that may have been forgotten or unheeded: “... what you said about the drop on your forehead ... and this line: ‘*and all my friends kiss my brow—are they taking their leave?*’ ... takes me back, it reminds me of me and my family, my brothers, my mother, children, grandchildren, in the hospital around the sick-bed of my father, the lung-machine was turned gradually off, hugging, kissing him, his forehead, and the sky was so clear, so blue ... ” The participant then intimates that this had been like being at least slightly more reconciled with death: “Afterwards I have been thinking that he gave us this last immense gift—dying is not that dangerous after all ... ” In the fullness of the ensuing silence the facilitator had a deep impression of this self-disclosure as being of great value: it had opened up thinking and feeling with poem about finality, and it created a shift in the group.

5.4. Being moved

A recurring experience in Shared Reading is that of being moved not by the poem itself, but by another group member’s emotional responses to a text. Even though on my own I would perhaps enjoy, but not love, a given poem, my reading experience is enhanced when I witness somebody else being clearly moved by it. Phenomenologically, the experience of being moved seems to have oxymoronic qualities: enjoyable sadness or happy tears, accompanied by sensations of tingling, a warm feeling in the chest and moist eyes (Menninghaus et al., 2015). Perhaps we could say that it is the passive component of empathy, the active component of which is *empathie*, of feeling one’s way into, attuning to and resonating with the other’s being. The story of the “kissing a father good-bye” or the lucidity of receiving the snowdrop on one’s brow could be termed transpersonal occurrences. Whether they belong to the poem or the respondent, whether they come from the other or from myself, is secondary. They are “in between”, they stretch between us and towards meaning. They are enter-tainments, creating both bonding and sustenance.

Furthermore, when someone makes a “creatively inarticulate” utterance, both verbal and gestural in its expression, speaking from an experience of being affected by their encounter with the poem, it is as if every member of the group senses that this is an important event. Such utterances, despite their lack of elegance or clarity, are *meaningful*, and as such carry their own, deep authority. Through this vicarious poetic empathy, one may return to the text with a fresh sense of its importance.

5.5. Resting in the fullness of silence

As everybody has experienced in group settings, silences can be terribly awkward. There is a pressing need to say something, but no one seems able to take up the responsibility. But in Shared Reading, such silences are very rare. For one thing, participants do not have to look at each other at all times, it is perfectly ok to be staring onto the page. Also, there is trust that the Reader Leader can manage transitions between speaking and silences by returning attention to the text. Thus, silences can be productive: a transpersonal space in which thinking and feeling may transpire. Such silences have their own distinct qualia. One such quale is that of fullness. It is as if after a decisive event, which has occasioned collective waves of cognitive or affective movement, we come to rest in the silence to digest and metabolise the work that has been done. We entertain the silence, and the silence entertains us. Such silences are collective achievements. This is a precious occurrence to which the Reader Leader must be very attentive: to register and appreciate when participants seem to lean back, with slightly coloured cheeks and satisfied look in their eyes, as if they are full up with meaning. There is a distinct sense that more things could be said, elaborated, pointed to but we have had our fill for now. Such silences have a clear mark of the sense of an ending. Even though we have not *clarified* every aspect of the poem, there is an experience of *meaningfulness*.

6. Conclusion

The phenomena described above are all empirical events observed to have occurred during one session of Shared Reading. There is no guarantee that all of them will occur every time, nor is it necessary. The Shared Reading of “A wet winter twig” shows us how different aspects of kinesic reading emerge through a process of distributed cognition. The group collectively manages to do what Cave aims for: “to move progressively deeper into the mode of close attention to literary texts” (Cave, 2016, p. x). Together we engage with the poem, and allow the poem to engage with us, in ways that many readers find difficult on their own. This effort of ours to clarify and specify such experiences is offered as a tentative and non-exhaustive catalogue of nine cognitive-affective affordances allowed by the distinctive ecology of Shared Reading. The invariant features of Shared Reading constitute an affordance nest made up of the double modality of the text, the Reader Leader as ignorant schoolmaster, and participation on a come as you are and join in basis.

Morgan (2017) delineates three strands in research on culture from the viewpoint of situated cognition: “the suprapersonal’s concern with wider interactions; the subpersonal’s with breaking the interplay of body, brain, and world into its constituent parts; the personal’s with negotiations and conflicts between human actants and with the process of taking responsibility” (2017, p. 226). We suggest that the term *transpersonal* may be used to encompass all three in order to account for moments of pre-reflective felt sense; personal disclosures of memories and imaginings, and negotiation of contrasting perspectives; and the meaningful space in which verbal and non-verbal interactions between poem and participants unfold. This transpersonal space emerges through distributed cognitive acts of productive diversion, complementarity of perspectives, bridging, musement, vivid embodiment, lucid imaginings, personal disclosures of affects and memories, vicarious empathy and shared silences.

Although a poem may afford kinesic, haptic, interoceptive and affective processes even when read on one’s own, these may be hard to realise for many readers as the capacity to sustain attention is limited due to metacognitive strategies that lead readers to aim for disembodied decoding rather than embodied engagement. The practice of Shared Reading shows that readers can come to tolerate what Keats famously termed “negative capability” (tolerance of not-knowing) regarding the

achievement of meaning clarity (tolerating underspecificity and polysemic indeterminacy) and to sustain attention to embodiment through collective effort, in order to experience meaning-fullness.

An avenue for future research would be, through surveys and think-aloud experiments, to find out what it is that makes poetry difficult and inaccessible. Moreover, through focus group reflections or post-session narrative accounts, to ascertain how the experience of Shared Reading can change reading strategies. What is also needed is more research into the specific invariant features that Shared Reading affords, and into the processes and qualities that facilitate distributed cognition in these communal spaces of reading. Thus far, interviews with participants indicate that experiences of safety, equality and belonging are paramount, as is the sense of wonder.

Through this case study, we hope to have demonstrated that a cognitive approach to research on Shared Reading can bring to light valuable phenomena that may otherwise remain under-appreciated in contexts where outcome or impact is foregrounded.

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Note

1. For more information about how Shared Reading emerged and developed as a practice, see: <https://www.thereader.org.uk/about/>.

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