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Cultivating virtue through poetry: an exploration of the characterological features of poetry teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibilities of using character education through poetry to cultivate virtue in a secondary-school context. It focuses on the philosophical assumptions behind the intervention development and some implications of the intervention. We explore character education and poetry teaching as a tool for moral reasoning through the means of the method of 'poetic inquiry,' drawing also on insights from Wittgenstein. Character education and 'poetic inquiry' share similar goals, but are not harmonious as far as theory and methodology goes. It clearly matters what exactly is to be cultivated, and in this paper we show that 'poetic inquiry' and character education, if used to foster practical reasoning, can be used as a means of ethical-cum-emotional self-cultivation. What makes both these case-specific approaches effective, and to some extent unique, is the possible employment of creative writing, and the development of the intellectual virtue of creative critical thinking.

1. Introduction

It is almost a platitude in character educational circles – drawing on theorists from Aristotle and Cicero to Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum – that character can be cultivated through works of great literature, especially novels and plays (and, in modernity, movies). Much less has been written about the characterological features of poetry teaching. This paper explores the possibilities of using character education through poetry to cultivate virtue in a secondary-school context. It is based on a PhD research project undertaken by the first author (Guttesen 2022).[1] The project as a whole involved a mixed-method approach, including both quantitative and qualitative elements. This paper focuses, however, on the philosophical assumptions motivating the intervention development and some implications of the intervention itself.

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In this paper, we begin by setting the background for this research by offering justifications for using poetry to develop virtue, and showing how creativity provides a link between poetry and virtue, after which we offer an introduction to 'poetic inquiry.' Subsequently, we enter into a philosophical reflection regarding the intervention involved in the research project. We conclude by summarising the role of creativity for cultivating virtue through poetry.

2. Background

This background section offers justifications for using poetry to develop virtue in a secondary-school setting and juxtaposes the potential characterological features of poetry teaching with the method of so-called 'poetic inquiry': a qualitative method used for incorporating poetry within research.

2.1. Justifications for using poetry to develop virtue

Drawing on Karen Bohlin and David Carr – two of the very few character educationists who have written specifically about poetry – we base our justifications for using poetry to cultivate virtue initially on arguments that are independent of the method of 'poetic inquiry.'

2.1.1. The nature of poetics and poetry

In his article 'On the contribution of literature and the arts to the educational cultivation of moral virtue, feeling and emotion,' David Carr argues 'that education is a matter of broad cultural initiation rather than narrow academic or vocational training; […] that any education so conceived would have a key concern with the moral dimensions of personal formation; […] that emotional growth is an important part of such moral formation; and […] that literature and other arts have an important part to play in such emotional education' (Carr 2005, 137). More specifically, all education is concerned with individual and emotional growth as part of personal formation, to which the study of literature in general, and poetry in particular, makes a significant contribution.

Adding to Carr's insights is a notion of poetry acting as the glue in the learning process, when Karen Bohlin describes how as

> teachers we are familiar with the power of pivotal moments in learning — when one student becomes enamored of Shakespeare or another begins writing original poetry for publication. These turning points excite new desires and sustain interest. (Bohlin 2005, 14)

The goal of Bohlin's book, *Teaching Character Education through Literature*, is to provide a means to elevate these turning points into '*morally* pivotal points in the lives of our students' (Bohlin 2005, 14), and she likens this process to what Dante 'refers to as a "conversio": a turning around or pivoting, which gives them

an ability to see more clearly where they are headed and why' (Bohlin 2005, 49). She further points out that by 'asking students to pay attention to how these morally pivotal points are brought about, they can begin to track the factors that help or hinder moral growth over time' (Bohlin 2005, 48).

Carr further observes that

> Aristotle maintains that wisdom or insight afforded by poetry 'is something more philosophic and of graver import than history', since it is addressed to matters of 'universal' rather than particular human concern. (Carr 2007, 385)

To this, he adds that the universals of poetry 'assist appreciation of many of the recurring moral themes and narratives of human experience' (Carr 2007, 385), noting, furthermore, that MacIntyre has emphasised that

> the key Aristotelian point about the value of poetry is that it shares the essentially teleological or narrative form of history and of other less 'scientific' modes of literature: on this view, the key intellectual value of such literature and arts is precisely that they assist our understanding of human motive and conduct in ways that the physicalist explanations and generalities of natural science leave largely untouched. (2007, 385)

Regarding the 'universal' objects of poetry, those may hold the key the puzzle that Carr discusses elsewhere (2022) of why psychologically underdeveloped and 'thin' scenarios, such as those of allegories/parables (e.g. Plato's Cave; Jesus's Good Samaritan) and short poems, often have stronger educational force than rich and 'thick' character descriptions in novels (contra Cigman 2018), in that the former attach themselves to and evoke universal core themes of human existence, abstracting away from particularities.

The above points are initial testaments to the value and nature of poetics and poetry, and their potential use for developing virtues (be those moral or intellectual). While some of these points could be used to support the characterological value of any form of literature (and even all art[2]), Carr and Bohlin both bring out the unique characteristics of poetry in eliciting morally relevant emotions, linking universals to particulars, and evoking epiphanic character-forming experiences. In the following, we explore further the link between poetry and virtue, knowledge and reasoning.

2.1.2. The intrinsic link between poetry and virtue, knowledge and reasoning

In this section we foreground two components of virtue from a recent framework for neo-Aristotelian character education.

First, 'virtue knowledge and understanding' comprises 'understanding the meaning of the virtue term and why the virtue is important, individually and as part of a well-rounded, flourishing life of overall virtue, and being able to apply the virtue to episodes of one's own and others' lives'. Second, 'virtue reasoning' comprises 'discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including in situations where virtues conflict or collide' (Jubilee Centre, 2017). In our

view, the appeal of, the interconnectedness and transformative nature of creativity makes poetry a primus motor of judgment and discernment about moral quandaries in human experiences and communication. The emotions guide our responses in all communication, and therefore act as what we, when quoting Bohlin earlier, called a 'glue' in forming bonds and developing our character. They do so, both by motivating virtue knowledge and understanding and by facilitating the preconditions for sound reasoning about virtues in complex encumbered situations.[3] However, they require a lot of creative thought and a metaphorical understanding of reality (i.e. understanding a contextual *x* as representative of a universal *y*) to achieve their developmental potential – and this is something that poetry can provide in abundance (Snævarr 2010).

According to T. S. Eliot, what 'every good poet starts from is his own emotion' (Eliot 1932, 117; here, quoted from; Asher 2017, 63). For Eliot, emotion denotes the inwardly turning while feelings refer to the outwardly directed (Asher 2017, 63). And, as Asher puts it, the task of the poet is to transmute emotion into feelings (2017, 63).

Here, we are reminded of Wittgenstein's description of the problem concerning the relation between the 'inner' and 'outer':

> The characteristic sign of the mental seems to be that one has to guess at it in someone else using external clues and is only *acquainted* with it from one's own case.

> But when close reflection causes this view to go up in smoke, then what turns out is not that the inner is something outer, but that "outer" and "inner" now no longer count as properties of evidence.[. . .] "Inner evidence" means nothing, and therefore neither does 'outer evidence'. [. . .]

> But indeed there is 'evidence for the inner' and 'evidence for the outer'.

> (Wittgenstein 2004, 61e-62e)

Although the inner and outer are interrelated, they do not automatically shed light on each other.

> What I want to say is surely that the inner differs from the outer in its *logic*. And that logic does indeed explain the expression "the inner", makes it understandable. (Wittgenstein 2004, 62e)

In keeping with Eliot's allegory, Wittgenstein is showing how emotion (the inner) functionally differs from feelings (the outer).

> "Of course actually all I see is the outer."

> But am I not really speaking only of the outer? I say, for instance, under what circumstances people say this or that. And I always mean *outer* circumstances. Therefore it is *as if* I wanted to explain (quasi-define) the inner through the outer. And yet it isn't so. (Wittgenstein 2004, 63e)

So, how, according to Wittgenstein, are the inner and outer interrelated? How can the outer reveal the inner? Some interpreters, especially in British ordinary-language philosophy (such as Ryle), understood Wittgenstein to be completely rejecting the existence of an 'inner life' and subscribing to a form of behaviourism. But as we can see from his own words, he does not reject the 'inner' (such as emotions); he simply thinks that we can only access it through the 'outer' (e.g. expressions of feelings that are not unique to the individual).

> "I see the outer and imagine an inner that fits it." [...]
>
> When mien, gesture and circumstances are unambiguous, then the inner seems to be the outer; it is only when we cannot read the outer that an inner seems to be hidden behind it. [...]
>
> The inner is tied up with the outer not only empirically, but also logically.
>
> The inner is tied up with the outer logically, and not just empirically. [...]
>
> "In investigating the laws of evidence for the mental, I am investigating the *essence* of the mental." Is that true? [...]
>
> Yes. The *essence* is not something that can be shown; only its features can be described. (Wittgenstein 2004, 63e-64e)

Drawing on Wittgenstein's suggestive remarks, it might be argued that what poetry does is exactly this: it reveals the 'inner' essence, i.e. what Carr (2007, 2022) refers to as the universal theme of emotion or virtue, through a specific kind of 'outer' knowledge and reasoning. If this is taken to be true, then poetry can aid discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including in situations where virtues conflict or collide (virtue reasoning by dint of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, see Darnell et al. 2019). It can also help students understand the meaning of virtue terms and why the virtue is important, individually and as part of a well-rounded, flourishing life of overall virtue, and being able to apply the virtue to episodes of one's own and others' lives (virtue knowledge and understanding). However, this is so far only a tentative suggestion that needs to be fleshed out and underpinned with a closer look at the nature and potential of poetic for characterological purposes.

2.2. Poetic inquiry

To the best of our knowledge, none of the (very few) character educationists who have promoted poetry as a method of character cultivation has drawn explicitly on the resources of the well-established approach of 'poetic inquiry.' It remains, therefore, an untapped source.

Poetic inquiry is at the same time an approach to education *qua* self-cultivation and a research method in qualitative social science research. It is an umbrella term for academic studies that employ poetry as a means or the product of inquiry (or both). Examples of these are research poetry or research

poems, poetic narrative, ethno-poems, interview poems, poetic portraits, auto-biographical poetry, autoethnographic poetry, investigative poetry, among many more (Prendergast 2009, xix–xxi).

Poetic inquiry is a specific process of questioning and creating, of 'contemplating truth-seeking followed by the creative expression of those truths discovered' (Elliott 2012). It seeks to discover and communicate truths, but unlike conventional philosophic and scientific inquiry, which deploy systematic and rational approaches to their projects and largely emphasise objectivity, it rather attends 'primarily to the existential and subjective dimension of truth' (Elliott 2012).

The very content of poetic inquiry, which sets it aside from other approaches, is obviously its use of poetry, or *poïesis*. In this expression lies the original meaning: to make, i.e. the act of creation. So, it allows us, at the same time, to discover and create. It is, in that sense, the ideal educational tool. For the sake of simplification, it is helpful here to distinguish more clearly between poetic inquiry as an educational *approach* and an educational *method*. As an approach, poetic inquiry relies on the ontological-cum-epistemological assumption that human experience is, partly, poetically structured (Snævarr 2010), and that to make sense of this experience, either using pre-existing poetry to structure experience or creating new poetry to restructure it can aid education *qua* self-cultivation. As an educational method, poetic inquiry proposes various practical uses of poetry in classroom contexts, for example in 'creating social change, a way of processing feelings, teaching from a vulnerable space, confronting inequality, and shifting the stories we tell to subvert dominant discourses that work to uphold oppression' (Manning 2014). Out of these, the method that is most relevant to our present concerns is processing feelings:

> [P]oetry invites the reader to 'step into' another person's experience. Furman [. . .] argues that 'the images inspired by a poem engage the reader in a creative relationship that moves beyond passivity to co-creation' [. . .]. When poets use words that appeal to our senses [. . .], the poet 'shows' us rather than simply telling us and perhaps can transport us to a place, time, and experience, which, if the image is effective, allows us to understand the emotion being conveyed in the poem' (Owton 2017, 8).

In this sense, perceiving is creating. When someone learns something new (about oneself or the way something in the world relates to oneself), and when one can truly apply this experience to oneself, it becomes meaningful. In the same way that algebra requires the student to find the unknown third point from two known points, creative thinking through poetry stretches the horizon of existential and subjective truths. Poetic inquiry seeks to discover and communicate these truths, while philosophic and scientific inquiry systematically seeks to emphasise objective truths (Elliott 2012).

It would be naïve, however, to conceive of 'poetic inquiry' as simply a natural conduit for character education of the Aristotelian kind. While they share similar

assumptions about the transformative potential of poetry and its truth-revealing value, 'poetic inquiry' hails from a tradition of thought that is significantly different from the Aristotelian one. First, poetic inquiry is a looser term and is used in a broader context, whereas character education has very specific theoretical underpinnings. Second, while poetic inquiry seeks to emulate the process of experiencing poetry, and present an outcome that is free to remain purely artistic (poetic), the characterological uses of poetry focus more on its inherent moral rather than aesthetic value. In other words, it can be said that a particular kind of character education (such as illustrated in this paper) involves poetic inquiry, but not necessarily vice-versa. Third, while the focus in poetic inquiry is on the subjective and existential, Aristotelian uses of poetry harness it in the service of objective truths about human existence.

2.2.1. Wittgenstein's method and use of language

To illuminate the ontological and epistemological assumptions of poetic inquiry, it is instructive at this juncture to discuss their relationship to Wittgenstein's well-known view of language in his latter works.

In the first part of *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009), Wittgenstein displays his philosophical method and tries to decipher the use of language. Throughout his career, he developed a philosophical approach and a way of thinking that can also be interpreted as an educational method. By this we are referring to his way of presenting problems or exercises to the reader, but wanting the reader to grapple with them as a means of edification. This demands critical thinking, and is perhaps derived from a distinct Austrian (and, to an extent, German) tradition of education from which Wittgenstein hails.[4] In this tradition, and certainly in Wittgenstein's use of it, a distinction is made between *Abrichtung* and *Bildung*. The former can be described as the training of an animal, in such a way that a habit or a rule is being impressed upon it (Rödl 2016). From the point of view of education, this is an 'upbuilding act' in the same way as early uncritical Aristotelian habituation, but not one of true education – at least not in the Enlightenment sense that we have inherited via Kant. The latter term, *Bildung*, signifies true education, and consists in enabling a child that you educate to think for herself or himself. To follow this trail of thought, we must make another distinction within *Bildung* or education. In the first, we are engaged with *Bildung des Verständnis*, this is the education of the brain, and in the latter, we are engaged with *Bildung des Herzens*, which is the education of the heart. A true *Bildung* of character, which many modern educators would agree is a fundamental aim of education, must take all of these three aspects of learning into account, namely both *Abrichtung* and the two forms of *Bildung*.

Wittgenstein acknowledged, implicitly at least, that the educational system has two primary functions, education and socialisation. In the educational tradition mentioned above, socialisation does not seem to be tackled directly,

but, perhaps, through the education of the heart, this may take place. Formally, the function of the first kind, education, is manifested in two ways, through the *descriptive* form of science and the *explanatory* form of science. If we observe how Wittgenstein regards these two forms of thought, what he often refers to as 'philosophical fog' (see e.g. Monk 1991, 328, p. 530) is the tendency of human thought to rely solely on the model of scientific explanation (Hagberg 2014). Prior to that, however, to understand what something is (Monk 1991, 530), one must see the connection between our perception and our aesthetic considerations (Hagberg 2014). This refers to how one attributes generality, and generality's truth, to a form of knowledge, and even laws of thought (Holingworth 2018). Wittgenstein exemplifies this in criticising logical propositions considered as laws of thought, namely in Russell's *Principia Mathematica*:

> The point of Russell's sentences is that none of them gives us any information about anything. If we substitute propositions of botany for '*p*' and '*q*', then the whole gives us no information about botany; it ceases to be a botanical sentence. This is the point of tautology: that if any part of it gives information, the rest cancels it out.
>
> Although Russell uses variables: '*p*', '*q*', etc., he could perfectly well have used ordinary sentences.—Think of demonstrations in Euclid, where nobody thinks we have proved the theorem for *this* circle. In the same way, one *can* perfectly well do algebraic proofs with numbers.—Russell's proofs would lose nothing of their generality, because generality does not lie in what is written down here, but in the way that you apply it.
>
> You give a proof here showing that this is a right angle. You apply it to every such angle in a circle.—So we could acknowledge any of Russell's proofs for *any* proposition, although what was written down was some special proposition.
>
> Now we could substitute 'it rains' and 'I get wet' in '$p . p \supset q . \supset . q$': 'If it rains, and it rains implies I get wet, that implies I get wet'—and we call this a *law of thought*.
>
> But isn't this queer? (Wittgenstein 1989, XXIX)

We can call these interconnected components of human thought aesthetic experience and aesthetic contemplation (Hagberg 2014). As Wittgenstein, throughout his career, unravels the use of language, it becomes apparent that the aim of his philosophical observations is to elevate the descriptive form of science into the poetic form – which, according to the insights of poetic inquiry is the most powerful form of thought. Viewed in this way, the aim of education becomes more chiselled, and, also, we are reminded that Wittgenstein once wrote: 'I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem*' (Wittgenstein 2002, 28e).

Now, let us consider the question: What is a poet? The obvious answer might be someone who can put into words feelings, thoughts, emotions for which

there are not exact pre-existing words or expressions. These new words or expressions then help to (re)structure reality. This feeling is something that is not *explained*, as Wittgenstein would have it, but *described*.

Therefore, a poet is a powerful medium for the describing form of science. If we accept this and ascribe to the poet an educational role, let us look at the following questions:

- What does poetry do?
- How does it do it?
- To what end does it do it?

In response to the first question, poetry provides the learner with a tool of understanding and engaging with a sphere of human thought that can only be attained through one's own experience. It is concerned with the willingness and ability of a person to put themselves in someone else's position.[5]

Wittgenstein's argument can be used to show that philosophy alone does not make one a better person. Likewise, Kierkegaard argued that philosophy's (abstract) language poses a barrier to virtue perception. Too much tends to be *said* and too little tends to be *shown*. For Kierkegaard (Hühn and Schwab 2015, 72–73), for example, one is overwhelmed by a tragic notion, because it brings into light something that one had not considered or even imagined before as tragic. So, an answer to the first question might be: Poetry portrays a (potentially new) experience in a meaningful way. In response to the next question, it does so by alluding to one's imagination. The final question, 'to what end does it do it?,' is perhaps the most important one, however, for present purposes.

As mentioned before, Wittgenstein believes that the object of philosophy, which perhaps is the oldest form of education, should be to improve one's 'thinking about the important questions of everyday life' (Malcolm 2001, 93). If poetry, as a way of understanding the connection between our perception and our aesthetic considerations (as illustrated with the example of attributing logical propositions as laws of thought), enables us to apply discernment in our life, making associations that are meaningful to us, it is through such a discernment that we learn something about ourselves. In the next section, we will give attention to the relation between language and the arts.

2.2.2. The relation between language and the arts

In a conversation with Norman Malcolm, on whether something such as the British 'national character' would permit an evil act that could be justified for a greater good, Wittgenstein questioned 'the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any . . . journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for

their own ends' (Malcolm 2001, 93; cf. ibid., 30). This, we hold, suggests that while philosophy would in such a case perhaps offer a deeper understanding of 'national character,' there is a deeper layer to the individual character (consisting of virtues and vices and personal states of character), and that this something can be identified as 'shown' (in Wittgensteinian terms), rather than 'said' (e.g. explained scientifically), through the display of emotions.

When speaking of a deeper layer of the individual character, we are referring to the 'distinguishing qualities that make us *who we are*' (Bohlin 2005, 182). Thus, the way of gaining an understanding of who we are is through observing emotions, whether we are displaying them ourselves or they are displayed by others.[6]

Language conveys the spectrum of emotions. However, the more mundane language of everyday conversation lacks some of the conceptual nuances that poetic language may provide. It is important to note here that although Wittgenstein is often depicted as an 'ordinary-language philosopher,' his concept of ordinary language also embraced ordinary words used in extraordinary ways to 'show' or 'hint at' things that cannot be said in mundane ways. Similarly, Kierkegaard holds that, at a first glance, language embraces subjectivity, and that, by breaking free from academically abstract language and embracing the language of the concrete and the aesthetic, one can become 'the subjective thinker,' for whom existence – life in all its concrete subjectivity – is the most essential thing (Beaver 2008). The subjective thinker 'adds to his equipment aesthetic and ethical passion, which gives him the necessary concreteness' (Kierkegaard 1945, 313; here, quoted from; Beaver 2008). He

> is not a man of science, but an artist. Existing is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough to give his life aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, and dialectical enough to interpenetrate it with thought. (Kierkegaard 1945, 314; here, quoted from; Beaver 2008)

In this manner, through *'showing' rather than 'saying' the emotions*, language and the arts open up a way to subjectivity and understanding of the self. The relation of language and art gives an insight into human existence. Next, we will attend to the relation between language and poetry, and its implications for the education of personal character.

2.3. Language and poetry

In the above, we touched upon the question of to what end poetry portrays an experience in a meaningful way. The answer we propose is: by alluding to one's imagination. Character educationist Bohlin (quoting Percy B. Shelly) stresses that imagination is a 'great instrument for moral good' and, subsequently, that moral . . .

> greatness requires the ability to "imagine intensely and comprehensively" because our vision of the possible worthwhile goals open to us is limited by our knowledge and experience. A person with no exposure to exemplary moral lives in either fact or fiction suffers from a serious handicap in attempting to lead a good life. (Bohlin 2005, 33)

Bohlin shows that imagination is a primus motor for character education. Moreover, she illustrates that moral imagination, which she refers to as 'not only a storehouse but also an intelligent guide' (Bohlin 2005, 34), consists of a number of key capacities, which can be accessed through poetry and narrative literature, namely moral vision, moral rehearsal, moral identity and moral judgment (2005, 34–35). Bohlin argues that literature enables and increases a '[s]eeing and the "ability to see"' which, according to her, involves 'penetrating the surface of ordinary experience and appearances to contemplate their meaning' (2005, 35). To put this into context, the moral imagination is catching emotions from the poetic or narrative literatures.

We would like to venture beyond Bohlin, however, and suggest that no literary form is better equipped to do so than poetry. In terms of the spectrum of language, arts and education, the normative or moral dimensions of educational and cultural growth are best attained through the cultivation of character or *virtue*, which in the first instance means to develop 'virtue literacy' among students (Jubilee Centre, 2017).

The elements of poetry that are conducive to increasing virtue literacy, to name a few, are:

- it induces the imagination, which, in turn, awakens the moral imagination
- it fosters ethical reflection, helping students to develop the cognitive side of their character
- it provides the students with a tool for recognising and acknowledging their feelings and emotions
- it gives the students an effective technique in measuring the aforementioned emotions against ethical concepts, vices and virtues, etc.

Although the arguments that we have synthesised above from Bohlin, Carr, Wittgenstein and others about the unique nature of poetry may stem from authors with very different philosophical orientations, they are consensual in foregrounding the role of poetry in shedding light, through its outward form, on the inner (emotional) life of the reader/moral agent and helping her to further sustain and develop that inner life. It might be objected that Wittgenstein's arguments on the route from the 'outer' to the 'inner' life are not moralised in the same way as Carr's and Bohlin's views – and could be used to explain a villain's development of her evil character. In that sense, while poetry has characterological value, that value could be about the entrenchment of bad character as well as good. This is why, in the following, we turn to the uses of

poetry within programmes of character education, which are obviously meant to be about the instilment of 'good' character.

3. Poetry intervention

The doctoral research, upon which this paper draws, involved a poetry intervention in a secondary-school context. This took the form of an experiment that had been shaped by a pilot project intervention. Since the methodology and main findings of the project are available elsewhere (Guttesen 2022), we single out for consideration here only features that are relevant to the present argument.

3.1. Research question and design

The research question addressed in the research project was:

Can poetry be used to cultivate virtue?

The intervention was designed to cultivate virtue by use of poetry in a secondary-school setting. The focus was on *strategies* for carrying out character education through poetry. A number of age-appropriate measures of participants were administered before and after the intervention to assess whether the programme had been successful in promoting empathy, pride and shame. The students were taught poetry as (A) a craft, (B) an art, and (C) as a source of moral reflection. This entailed reading and writing poetry, as well as philosophical discussion and contemplation, and exercises in creative thinking.

The research design took as a starting point the three themes or categories of (1) empathy, (2) pride and (3) shame. The reasons for the choice of these topics were both theoretical and practical. The theoretical reasons had to do with these topics being relevant for moral character while the practical reasons derived from the fact that they are currently relevant and are, in different context, present in the relevant national school curriculum. What connects them, for present purposes, is that they contain suggestions of virtuous actions and emotions that are characterologically relevant (Kristjánsson 2018).

3.2. Some implications of the intervention

In the following, we will introduce briefly the three central concepts to this study, a virtue, namely *empathy*, and two character-relevant emotions, *pride* and *shame*.

Empathy is the ability and attitude of engaging in the understanding of other people through putting oneself 'in the shoes' of another person (Helskog 2020, 218). Empathy has been understood in various ways in the literature: as (a) an

emotion, (b) as a psychological condition for certain other-regarding emotion, without itself being an emotion; or, as it is seen here, (c) a broad-based virtue.[7] Ideally, *pride* is an upbuilding emotion, but naturally within a poem the relevant context will determine this.[8] It is important to view *shame* as being potentially educationally positive, if applied in the right medial way. In an educational sense, proper shame can serve the purpose of 'guiding moral learners in the right direction' (Kristjánsson 2018, 98).

At the end of the intervention, the researcher conducted focus-group interviews with the participants. During these, the students said that the approach taken in the poetry learning materials had allowed them to dive deeper into the meaning of poems compared to that of reading poems in a standard literacy class. For one student, for instance, a particular poem stood out, which articulated the pain attributed to a fish when boiled alive. This discussion indicated that the student had found poems that conveyed *empathy* meaningful. When asked to describe the lesson content of the learning materials, instead of naming, say, specific virtues and vices, the students typically claimed the materials were about 'good' and 'bad attributes.' They explained that other school subjects also had moral content, but that they mostly watched educational films for that aim, and by far the most touched-upon subject, as far as moral awareness goes, was bullying prevention. They said that doing the exercises contained within the poetry learning materials helped them 'think outside the box.'

It is outside of the present purview to summarise here all the findings coming out of this poetry intervention (see Guttesen 2022). Let us focus here on three points only. *First*, the teaching materials seemed to help students identify relevant emotions, virtues and vices. To put this finding in the context of the earlier discussion, through engagement with poetry, students are indeed guided into acquiring virtue literacy. This takes place through the reading, writing and discussing both aspects of this approach, i.e. the reading and writing of poems. Therefore, virtue literacy is acquired both via the content of the learning material and the process of the learning. The Jubilee Centre (2017) seems to equate 'virtue literacy' with learning names of 'virtues' and 'virtue groups' (e.g. 'moral' virtues versus 'intellectual' ones). Our findings indicated, however, that students can acquire nuanced perception of virtuous qualities and their inter-relationships and 'show' this new-found knowledge in their own poetry writing, while still referring to the concepts with bland words (such as 'good attribute'). As Wittgenstein reminded us, showing is not the same as saying.

Second, according to the teachers, what they and the students particularly liked were the creative writing exercises, in which they had been given specific instructions and criteria to create under. According to the teachers, the students had improved their problem-solving skills through those exercises, and when prompted, the teachers related this progress to the development of practical wisdom or *phronesis* (as described e.g. in the Darnell et al. 2019 model).

Third, the most effective part of this intervention was the students' own poetry writing. The implication of this finding is that poetry does indeed have one clear advantage over novels and films as a vehicle for character education. While asking students to write their own novel or make their own film is often not practically feasible, the creation of a short poem can easily be conducted within the time constraints of a single class.

4. Conclusion

According to Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, the main object of philosophy is, and should be, educational. However, the restraints of academic language prevent this from being realised. The examples given by Wittgenstein illustrate a strong critique to this effect. The relation between arts and language falls within the scope of character education, as one of its key component and subject matter is the students' emotions and the enabling of their discernment of these emotions. Although Wittgenstein's own musings about the *poetic, creative* nature of language obviously do not will within the ambit of character education, as typically understood, they are characterologically relevant, as shown in the above research project.

So, what then is creativity and what is its connection with education? According to Cropley, in discussions about creativity and its meaning, especially in an educational (or psychological) context, there is a common core containing three elements:

(1) *novelty* (a creative product, course of action or idea necessarily departs from the familiar);
(2) *effectiveness* (it works, in the sense that it achieves some end – this may be aesthetic, artistic or spiritual, but may also be material such as winning or making a profit);
(3) *ethicality* (the term 'creative' is not usually used to describe selfish of destructive behaviour, crimes, warmongering and the like) (Cropley 2005, 6)

These three elements represent cause, effect and interaction. The first element indicates that what is being produced is unlikely to be produced by anyone else. The second element indicates that first the environment (or circumstances) must facilitate creative behaviour and then that, as an interaction, creativity involves psychological traits. The environment:

> includes the resources that it makes available (both human and material), the degree of divergence or risk taking that will be tolerated, or the kinds of rewards (or punishments) that it offers people who diverge from the unusual. (Cropley 2005, 7)

The third element refers to a rule or habit of conduct with regard to right and wrong (or a body of such rules and habits). *Creativity as an interaction* is akin to a restriction of the kind that these psychological traits 'do not express

themselves in isolation but within the framework offered by the particular person's environment. More importantly, the 'quality, quantity and timing of these factors affect acquisition (or not) of knowledge and skills needed for creativity, as well as of favourable (or unfavourable) attitudes' (Cropley 2005, 7). At the core of all this, Cropley holds, is the human element. Creativity is a human conduct.

While the original intention of our poetry intervention was to cultivate virtue literacy and the intellectual virtue of critical thinking (*qua* Aristotelian *phronesis*), what stood out even more at the end was the creativity it encouraged rather than mere criticality. The upshot was that utilising poetry in the service of character education can encourage *critical creative thinking*.

Notes

1. The documents relating to ethical approval, participants' consent, measurement tools, and lesson plans, can be accessed here: http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/12718 (See appendices.)
2. For some mysterious reason, virtue ethicists like Nussbaum and character educationists like Carr hardly ever discuss the value of visual arts (e.g. painting and sculpture) for character development.
3. We rely here on the Aristotelian understanding of practical reasoning that sees it as involving the infusion of emotion with reason, rather than understanding reason and emotion as antithetical (Darnell et al. 2019).
4. In the following, we owe a great deal to Dr. Michael Nedo, director of the Wittgenstein Archive at Cambridge, whom the first author met and spoke extensively with, at the Archive, in November 2017. We are grateful to him for his valuable assistance and input into this investigation.
5. This does not mean that one learns only what oneself has experienced, but, rather, that one 'reaches for' or connects with the portrayed experience because one accepts the possibility and impact of oneself of experiencing what is being described.
6. Communication about art offers a way to 'catch' emotions, both in the sense that you catch a freeze-frame of an emotion in order to try to understand it, and also in the sense that we literally 'catch' emotions from each other through so-called emotional contagion. In one sense, it is about understanding a feeling or making sense of it, and in the other sense it is about feeling something as others feel it, often associated with empathy. Thus, personal character can be 'shown' through the display of emotions, and engaging with arts is a tool for discovering them. While all the arts may arguably be helpful here, Wittgenstein's above considerations put a special premium on poetry and poetic language.
7. To add to the confusion, there is a common conflation between 'empathy' and 'sympathy', harking all the way back to David Hume who used the term 'sympathy' for what most modern scholars would call 'empathy' (Kristjánsson 2018, chap. 4). For the purposes of the present intervention, we decided to rely on an understanding of empathy as a virtue, as this is a common understanding in the character-education literature. Empathy is there typically understood as a broad-based trait that encompasses both sympathy, compassion and pity, i.e. as a general trait of identifying with, and feeling pain at, other people's bad fortune.

8. In an individualistic sense, pride can both be perceived as a morally positive and negative emotion. But other aspects of it, such as the idea of national pride (as connected with nationalism), tend to be regarded in a negative way. While empathy is directed at other people, pride is directed at oneself (Kristjánsson 2018, 9).

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