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Towards Therapeutic Reading

PART I:

IDENTITY WORK:

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH READING

There is a huge amount of research data on the importance of reading for human growth and development. According to modern research, the stories we hear and read shape our minds, but we have no definite information about exactly how this happens. Bibliotherapists also carry out work on literature and reading, but when it comes to the development of therapeutic methods, reading has been overshadowed by writing. In this three-part series of articles, I ask whether new research on reading could prove valuable to bibliotherapists and what we as bibliotherapists can bring to the current debate about reading.

For several years, I have run a university course on therapeutic, transformational reading in which I invite literature students in particular to join me in considering what therapeutic or transformational reading might mean in the light of the latest findings in the humanities. We immediately notice that research into reading is not the sole prerogative

of the humanities, let alone of literature specialists, but is increasingly also found in the fields of cognitive psychology and the neurological and medical sciences, as well as in the medical humanities which exist in the border zone between the sciences and humanities. Some research presents reading as the direct key to empathy and developing theory of mind (Kidd & Castano 2013), and useful in every respect for training the mind (Landy 2012; Polvinen 2012). But ultimately, what do we really know about the power of reading? In what sense can reading be said to be *formative*, *transformative* or even *therapeutic*? Can reading be a cure? What, in the end, do we know about therapeutic reading or bibliotherapeutic reading?

One might think that a therapist working with bibliotherapy would have a great deal of theoretical and practical knowledge of reading which they then apply in their own work. There is theory-in-use, there are process models and there is expert knowledge, associated with different schools and trends of psychotherapy, about the shaping of identity and the mental mechanisms linked to reading and the bibliotherapy process. Personally, I consider that this is precisely where bibliotherapists have something to add to the current debate on reading and research into reading – in perceiving what happens in interactional reading therapy and the kinds of mechanisms it involves. Might it be possible to compile data on therapeutic reading which could be used in bibliotherapy training and in methodological use in the field itself, applied in educational institutions, libraries, nursing homes, mental health work and clinical work, in various care institutions – the areas in which bibliotherapy takes place in Finland? Could working with bibliother-

apy also provide a social benefit – for example in building modern human identity, increasing feelings of belonging and participation – now that even the daily papers are discussing the decline in the reading skills of young people, especially boys?

In this article, I concentrate on identity work linked to reading. I begin by outlining ideas about the opportunities of reading to influence identity presented in research into reading in the field of literature. At the end of the article, I examine the data we have on bibliotherapeutic reading. While this article does not offer an opportunity to cover the subject in any great depth, I present some names and some observations. I cover literature researchers, bibliotherapists, and my colleagues applying different bibliotherapeutic methods in Finland, as well as in Sweden, where data on bibliotherapeutic reading has been eagerly accumulated in recent years (e.g. Ihanus 2004; Nilsson & Pettersson 2009; Frid 2016). The purpose of my article is to invite people to join me in opening the doors to therapeutic reading – in theory and in practice.

HUMANISTIC RESEARCH ON READING: GROWING AND DEVELOPING AS A PERSON THROUGH READING

What sort of man should I be? What was the meaning of the world? [-] While following others' lives, dreams, and ruminations in their stories and their essays, I knew I would keep them in the deepest recesses of my memory and never forget them [-]. With the knowledge I gathered from my

reading, I would chart my path to adulthood. (Pamuk, *On Reading. Words and Images*, p. 110.)

The importance of reading in shaping selfhood – the psyche, in developing a soul and shaping a human into an ethical actor in society – was well-known in the Europe of the past, in antiquity and the Middle Ages (e.g. Manguel 1996/2005; Stock 2006). In the *Apology of Socrates*, Plato has Socrates express this core of tradition; in teaching people to know themselves and care for themselves, Socrates is teaching people to take care of common issues in society. In a similar spirit, in our day, Turkish Nobel Prize-winner Orhan Pamuk writes in the above quote about the ability of literature to reflect and shape human identity. In his autobiographical essay *On Reading* (2006), Pamuk has his first-person narrator present the basic questions of Western work on identity: What sort of person should I be? What kind of person do I want to be? The questions are derived from humanistic values – care for other people – although this is not mentioned in this text. Pamuk’s care for other people is expressed in many of his other essays. In his Nobel lecture, “My Father’s Suitcase”, for example, Pamuk (2006, p. 528) writes about how modern literature should depict the fear of being left outside and the feeling of worthlessness, offer a surface for identity and reflection, above all for people who feel themselves useless.

There is no doubt that research has been conducted into the effect of reading in shaping identity. Here, I will initially concentrate on the debate in literature studies and the humanistic tradition. Professor of English, Liberal Education and Pedagogy Marshall Gregory has sought to create a

coherent theory on the formative effect of reading, shaping the self and producing its individuality based precisely on humanistic values, for example. According to Gregory, the importance of reading in forming an individual and personal identity lies in the way literature opens to the reader models of being, living, feeling and relating – word for word, detail for detail – through the characters and situations it presents (Gregory 1995; 2009).

Fictional stories are central to Gregory's theory, as is the idea of forming an individual personal identity narratively, in the manner of a story and through stories. In recent decades, narrative research has attracted increasing attention among researchers in a variety of fields, who, through it, have found a shared subject for discussion and research. (See, e.g. Bruner 1978/2004; MacIntyre 1981/2007; Hänninen 1999; Hyvärinen 2010; Brockmeier 2015.) It is worth bibliotherapists following, and where possible also contributing to, the identity debate of narrative researchers (see Ihanus 2009). Based on narrative thinking, Gregory in any case emphasises the developmental aspects of reading, the idea whereby stories are an important part of the individual's ethical development: "Exposure to stories is educational and therefore formative" (2009, p. 3). His arguments are also associated with an emphasis on moral education – and through this also the idea that not all reading is good and that some stories may be dangerous:

We cannot measure the effect on our health of each individual fork of food we eat or each individual dose of medicine we take, but we nevertheless know that, cumulatively and incrementally, those forks of food and those doses of medi-

cine configure our bodies and condition our health in ways that, ultimately, can only explained by tracing the effects back to the influence of those individual bites and those individual pills. So it is with the incremental influence exerted on our minds and hearts over time by the countless stories we tell and consume. (Gregory 2009, p. 22.)

A single book will not push us in one direction or the other, but as a sum of individual books and the result of our reading history, our identity starts to bend in a particular direction. Like creates like?

Emphasising ethical and moral subjectivity – what we do, the values on which we operate – links Gregory’s theory to an older humanistic tradition and especially to philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s thinking, to which Gregory also refers. According to Nussbaum, fiction can be fruitful in terms of the moral development of the individual: “a novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life.” (Nussbaum 1990, p. 162; cf. Gregory 2009, p. 44.) According to Nussbaum, fiction confirms our capacity for empathy and increases our inclination to do good. Taking a similar approach, David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) have also argued for the novel’s ability to directly influence theory of mind – in other words our ability to understand other people’s mental states and put ourselves in someone else’s shoes.

Professor of Literature at Uppsala University Torsten Pettersson writes in the same vein in his article “Att läsa för att utvecklas” (2009) about the opportunity of literature to make visible something within ourselves that we had

not previously realised but for which we have now found the words from our reading. He too emphasises the importance of literary fiction and in his article seeks to create an understanding of literature that encompasses reading fiction and personal growth. According to Pettersson, a central element in terms of developing identity and growth is the reader's opportunity to freely insert themselves into the situations presented and characters depicted in fiction, and live, through the words, the actual life situation and internal emotional world experienced by the subject presented in the novel. Nussbaum's thinking is apparent here too. Through the imagination, the reader can identify with and see another person's internal world from the inside – in a better and safer way if and when they are aware that the person concerned is a fictional character. According to Pettersson, literary fiction in particular brings us different human characters and life situations to experience – in other words, models that we can identify with, for how to be and how to live. In our reading, we can examine them safely – remotely, protected by fiction. (Pettersson 2009.)

In a lecture given in January 2017, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Turku Hanna Meretoja is on the same track. Meretoja particularly emphasises the power of imagination offered by literary fiction – the opportunity of literature to shape the ways and means with which we question things and explore the world:

Instead of literature producing in us an assurance that we understand ourselves and others, its ethical potential is more associated with its power to destabilise this kind of assurance. Often, simply realising that we do not under-

stand opens an opportunity to see the world differently. The power of literature to broaden our consciousness of what is possible is more often based on experiences of confusion, being lost, and of complexity rather than undisputed visions of a good life. (Meretoja 2016.)

There is a great deal of literature on the subject. However, the points I refer to above are not conceptually new innovations. On the contrary, the argument is largely founded on an old humanistic understanding of the gradual effect of reading, which was written about by thinkers of the ancient world and the Middle Ages (cf. Stock 2006). Another frequent problem with humanistic reading theories is a naivety and an over-optimistic approach in evaluating the impact of reading – a point that Meretoja (2017) raises – as well as the way that literature is usually limited solely to literary fiction or storytelling.

A humanistic-based awareness of literature and reading as a means of developing identity or selfhood is applied in many areas, such as in mother tongue (Finnish/Swedish) teaching in Finland (see, e.g. Ahvenjärvi & Kirstinä 2013). At the same time, library reading groups rely on information about reading and building identity, as is shown in two excellent books which gather together information about reading from libraries: *Lukupiirikirja* (2010) edited by Johanna Matero, Ritva Hapuli and Nina Koskivaara, and Nina Frid's book *Läsa, läka, leva! Om läsfrämjande och biblioterapi* (2016). Both books also cautiously open the doors to bibliotherapy and reading therapy (especially Holma 2010, pp. 56–58; Ratia 2010, p. 186; Frid 2016, pp. 83–142).

BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC IDENTITY WORK
AND DATA ON READING

Bibliotherapeutic developmental groups are associated, as their name suggests, with the idea of supporting the growth of the individual. In these – as in all other bibliotherapeutic work, carried out both with individuals and in groups – it is also possible to use reading to support participants' work with identity (McCarty-Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986/2012, p. 32). But what approach does bibliotherapy take to building identity? And how does reading shape us? What kind of literature and what kind of reading? On what research or factual information is the idea of reading as a force for shaping identity or as a force for development based?

The answers are not simple, as the theoretical foundation for bibliotherapy is eclectic. There is no such thing as a coherent theoretical basis for bibliotherapy. This means that bibliotherapy is carried out on the basis of many different kinds of theories – including within the theoretical frameworks of psychoanalysis, Jungian analytical psychology, phenomenology, humanistic psychology or cognitive psychology. An interactive process model and an integrational approach have proved the most promising, and in practice many therapists combine different frames of reference in their work. (See, e.g. Ihanus 2009, p. 20.)

The debate on identity theory also forms an area in its own right. In practice, every professional psychotherapist has their own theory-in-use and associated understanding of the formation of identity or selfhood – and possibly also of the use of and importance of reading in this work. Perhaps some kind of common basis could at least be found

between many modern schools and approaches. According to current understanding, our identity, our individual and/or personal identity, is fundamentally shaped intersubjectively or relationally, in other words in relation to other people. As mammals, we are placed in relation to someone else and to our own particular living environment from as early as the womb. According to the prevailing understanding, identity is also a dynamic system, which is built in a life-span perspective from childhood to death (see Dumont 2010, pp. 98–99). A person can thus still develop as an adult (Fadjukoff 2007), which creates a basis and opportunities for working with identity with adults, for example in bibliotherapeutic developmental groups.

As we understand it today, our identity or our selfhood is not a permanent “self-block” built on top of certainties and lasting memories, but a fragile and living organism, constantly changing over time. We are constantly changing in line with our nature, but we have the skills and means of creating the necessary feeling of continuity and permanence in the midst of the ongoing flow of life. Antonio Damasio, for example, who has researched the neurobiological basis for identity, has written about the foundation of our sense of self as being a throbbing physical flow of emotion in the background of our existence and our circumstances. Language, however, gradually enables us to form autobiographical memory, experience of the self in a temporal dimension, and, through that, an identity or an autobiographical self. (Damasio 2000, 2010; see Kosonen 2016.)

This understanding of identity enables us to carry out bibliotherapeutic work with clients or patients. Another

person, the client or patient, needs help, or support, or to make sense of their life, and another person, the bibliotherapist, puts themselves at their disposal, alongside them, as their discussion partner. In the bibliotherapeutic process, the reflective other is the psychotherapist or bibliotherapist – and the therapy process also encompasses all the aspects of their identity too. In this work, one’s self-knowledge and own interaction skills are naturally of essential significance – and supervision and self-reflective methods are therefore necessary.

Group work is another category in its own right, where ideally there should also be a command of the rudiments of group dynamics. The importance of the group cannot be exaggerated in bibliotherapeutic work on identity. Reflective and therapeutic writing guide and researcher Jeanie Wright states that we need others to become ourselves and writes:

Given that there can be no ‘self’ without ‘other’ and no ‘individual’ without ‘group’ [--] trying to understand more about the ‘self’ is fundamentally a group exercise (Wright 2012, p. 23).

The group may however provide significant and crucial support for the individual participant in building their identity, the story of their lives or finding their own voice (cf. Kosonen 2017).

In bibliotherapy, however, the readable textual material – and all the associated other texts and “voices” behind the text both visible and invisible – brings its own “otherness” into play. According to an intertextual and dialogic under-

standing of text, such as that of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory, the word is not static; the word is a living, communal word that carries with it its own history and is given meaning anew in each context in which it is spoken. According to Bakhtin, every word and utterance also always contains an alien voice, and only a dialogic, participatory attitude will succeed in relating to another person's words as another person's words, genuinely as the other person's meaningful position. (Bakhtin 1929/1991, p. 100.) In bibliotherapy, as in all other kinds of therapy, this kind of dialogic approach is ideal (Linnainmaa 2009, pp. 61–67).

All this – the identity process, the therapy process, the reading process – regarding which I have only been able to provide a skeletal overall picture above – is activated in each bibliotherapy session which uses literature and reading. But on the basis of what understanding of reading does a bibliotherapist operate who has only brief training in bibliotherapy and does not have basic training in psychotherapy? On what kind of identity and development theory and reading theory do they base their work? Is it ultimately even permitted to talk of reading therapy if the aim is to refer to a bibliotherapeutic situation and activity in which the therapy process and its associated dialogic and interaction are central?

At the moment, for example, the terms “bibliotherapy” and “reading therapy” can be used to refer to all kinds of “reading promotion work”, as such carried out by library staff, social workers and teachers in giving their customers, clients and students reading recommendations (McCarty-Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986/2012, pp. 10–11; cf. Frid 2016). Similarly, under the huge umbrella term of biblio-

therapy Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin are able to offer their readers novel therapy in their trendy book *The Novel Cure. An A-Z of Literary Remedies* (2013, p. 1). Berthoud and Elderkin's identity therapy seems extremely pleasant – for an identity crisis, one might read, for example Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (ibid., p. 213) – but it would be difficult to start carrying out proper bibliotherapy using their methodological package. There is starting to be a real need for some kind of overall presentation of reading theory, as Juhani Ihanus has also noted (see, e.g. Ihanus 2004, pp. 22–23).

And what about research into reading? What kind of understanding do we have of reading? The general understanding is that literature – reading – gives us words, expressions and structures. It helps us to understand feelings and motives. It conveys information about social events, values, norms, beliefs and attitudes. It broadens our awareness. The influence of literature, with all its complexity, is special by its very nature, as Professor of Comparative Literature Hanna Meretoja reminds us (2017):

Literature affects us in many different ways: it awakens experiences of recognition, produces an understanding of the complexity of things and enriches our emotional life. There is no area of knowledge that literature could not address in some form, but unlike most areas of science, literature examines different phenomena of reality namely on the basis of their human importance and meaningfulness, from the perspective of people operating in the world. Its intrinsic areas are the most fundamental questions of human existence which wish to remain outside science. (Meretoja 2017.)

Regarding the psychological basis of reading, we know that reading benefits the development of a person's (personal) identity, partly because our language and stock of expressions develop and are able to develop by means of reading at different phases of life. By reading alone or in a group, to ourselves or listening to someone else's voice, we increase our vocabulary and stock of expressions, and we gain words to communicate and express our own thoughts and feelings.

It has been suggested that literary fiction, poetry and poetic language can offer us expressive material, particularly when we are dealing with the most difficult human experiences that we encounter, such as grief (cf. Saresma 2000) or death (see Saresma 2007; Hulmi 2012) or experiences in general that are difficult to put into words, such as early experiences of trauma (see Bollas 1993; cf. Knuuttila 2009). Literary fiction speaks to us holistically – as people – offering us words and descriptions of things and phenomena that do not fit within any classification of symptoms or diagnoses.

Among other things, these kinds of generally known and accepted benefits associated with reading, derived from the psychology of reading or adopted from elsewhere and frequently circulated, form a basis for bibliotherapeutic reading theory and working. People's stories and identity are constantly shaped by language – and using language, we use words and reading to open up new viewpoints and worlds of experience to clients in bibliotherapeutic work through which they shape their identity. (Ihanus 2004.) According to philosopher and psychologist Kirsti Määttänen (1996), it is possible to maintain identity and a feeling of continu-

ation through remembering – in other words by nurturing one’s own aliveness – possibly through autobiographical writing, which does not necessarily even have to aim to be the story of one’s whole life (see Kosonen 2014, 2015).

A large amount of reading-based work on identity is carried out in bibliotherapy. Reading is almost always referred to when presenting bibliotherapy work but observations often remain at a general level – without particularly problematising literature and reading. Almost all books and articles in the field mention works recommended for use in working with clients and present exercises; in some cases more literature is listed and in more detail.

A particularly large amount of reading-based work on identity has been developed in story therapy with children and young people (see Mäki & Kinnunen 2002; Mäki & Arvola 2009ab; Suvilehto 2014). Silja Mäki (2015) has also carried out story therapy with adults and developed a group model for it, in which clients both read fairy tales and write their own derived from these. In this work, reading fairy tales and myths is presented as an important factor in growth and development – strengthening a sense of roots, attachment and belonging. The books are practical in nature and contain useful exercises; their primary aim is not to gather and model data about reading. The same is true of Jussi Sutinen’s excellent *SelfStory* (2010), a method intended for use in child protection. The method is based on narrative therapy and bibliotherapy, but information about bibliotherapy processes is not mentioned or explained.

Arleen McCarty-Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry’s four-stage bibliotherapeutic process model is a central procedur-

al tool in bibliotherapy. The model is presented in depth in books and articles: identification, selection, presentation and follow-up. In Finland too, the model is presented in many of the textbooks on the topic (e.g. Huldén 2002, pp. 82–85; Linnainmaa 2009, p. 22; Mäki & Arvola 2009a, pp. 15–16). But why can I find no literature in which anyone has started to develop this model further, expanding it with literature and material, questions and considerations based on the latest research on reading? Somewhere is there an identity theory framework or procedural reflection for this, in itself excellent, model which works in reading therapy? How is the model used? What kinds of experiences are there of using it?

There is a great deal of useful information about selecting and using material (e.g. McCarty-Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986/2012; Papunen 2002, 2005). In working with bibliotherapy, what is essential is that the material to be read arouses something – a feeling or emotional response – in the person or the group, not what discipline or literature classification the text belongs to. This takes professional skill.

Thus it is not necessary to solely rely on stories in bibliotherapeutic work on identity. Other kinds of lyrical and fragmentary texts, essays, even short-form prose can be used too. In fact, the bibliotherapy field has traditionally paid a great deal of attention to poetry and the power of poetic language to move mute and even unknown areas of our minds. It is also claimed that poetry therapy in particular can help people to make sense of their identity and to create a shape for undefined feelings and even for unexplored thoughts. (See, e.g. Mertanen 2002; Kähmi 2015.)

Many bibliotherapists use literary fiction and serious literature in their work, e.g. short prose, short stories, which are suited for group work, but long prose and large novels are also used to as great an extent. In the multidisciplinary study on shared reading conducted by the University of Liverpool, for example, groups with depression and suffering chronic pain concentrated on serious literature, in other words the kind of storytelling literature that can address the major and existential questions of life (Billington et al 2017). However, recent debate seeks to remind us that often there is also a need for “different” or lighter material, including crime fiction, as Liz Brewster (2017) writes, drawing on her empirical research in her article “Murder by the book. Using crime fiction as a bibliotherapeutic resource”. The point of using entertaining literature, according to Brewster, is that in certain life situations, such as depression, a place of refuge and retreat located in a parallel world offered by reading is necessary and beneficial.

Of course bibliotherapy can also use non-fiction and different autobiographical and self-help literature. However, the therapist should be precise regarding the limits of their own awareness and expertise (Papunen 2002, p. 258). At best, factual material, non-fiction, factual prose and informative articles can be used psycho-educationally to create a holistic picture of the issue studied, to help people in changing their viewpoint and remind them of the fact that their emotions are common – I am not alone in my shame.

WITH SOMEONE ELSE, TOWARDS SOMEONE ELSE

In our reading, we can see ourselves in the mirror of another person or a generalised other person. By internalising other people's expectations, we shape ourselves and our behaviour, our existence in relation to others. At best, reading – temporal, long, intensive reading – offers an opportunity to live in another person's words, see the world as if through the eyes of another mind. It is also possible to gain a compensatory experience through reading; I can become visible in the pages of a book. I am not alone, I am not invisible.

We know about the formation of identity, about the dynamics of reading and the effects and benefits of reading. The core area of bibliotherapy is applying this knowledge in bibliotherapy work. Bibliotherapeutic identity work continues where bibliotherapeutic reading research leaves off – in a practical interactive situation, listening to a person's uniqueness, taking into account their special situation – such that the client has an opportunity to experience growth through the therapy process. However, this process could start to become clearer and more focused in terms of reading therapy methods, so that we could start to build a more solid foundation for therapeutic reading, enabling us to know what works and what does not need to change, what we could correct or do better, or what we could find additional information about.

In the second article in the series, I will examine the dynamics of reading and the interactive process of bibliotherapy. I will ask what happens when we read, what happens in the reading process itself, according to the current

knowledge. I will present the phenomenological theory of reading and alongside it an object-relations theory model as well as the bibliotherapy process model with which many people will be familiar. In the third part of the series, my aim is to finally explore the latest multidisciplinary research on reading and different forms of group reading.

This article opens a series in three parts on therapeutic reading. It is part of a sub-project on narratives and reading conducted at the University of Turku as part of the Academy of Finland's Instrumental Narratives project (iNarr, 2018-2022).

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