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## Towards Therapeutic Reading

PART II:  
THE INTERACTIVE PROCESS OF READING

Reading offers an opportunity to become close to another person, to be absorbed in another person's words, experience the world in another person's shoes, and see through someone else's eyes. A great deal of research has been carried out into reading and the effects of reading and much has been written on the topic, but there is no common understanding of the interactive state that reading brings about. What really happens when we read? To answer this question, I turned to bibliotherapy theory and research on reading in the field of literary studies with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of the processes of therapeutic reading.

The fundamental text on interactive bibliotherapy is considered to be Arleen McCarty Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry's book *Biblio/Poetry Therapy. The Interactive Process: A Handbook* (1986/2012). The book provides guidance in bibliotherapy in particular and has less to say about writ-

ing-based methods. The book also offers a great deal of useful information on questions concerning the use of material, the characteristics and professional skills of a bibliotherapist or reading therapist, and the basics of group dynamics. The most important element of the book in terms of therapeutic reading is the four-stage bibliotherapy process, the four stages being recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and finally application to self, i.e. applying what has been read and reflected on to oneself and one's own life (ibid., pp. 31–48). The idea is that literature is the catalyst; a section of text evokes an emotional response in the reader which enables the therapy process to begin, with the help of the bibliotherapist or bibliotherapy group leader, based on their approach and theory-in-use together with the therapy client or the member of the group (ibid., p. 33).

Bibliotherapists in the Nordic countries are familiar with the bibliotherapy model created in the US by Benedictine nun Arleen McCarty Hynes (1916–2006) for St. Elizabeths Hospital library and developed further by her daughter, Dr Mary Hynes-Berry MD. An updated form of the model is taught as part of the basics of bibliotherapy and referred to in recent debate and research in Finland (Kähmi 2015) and in Sweden (Frid 2016). The model is useful, but debate surrounding bibliotherapy pays surprisingly little attention to its theoretical foundation and practices, let alone its application as part of different theories-in-use. Perhaps the model is so clear and so unambiguously practical that there is no need to discuss it. Is everyone already clear about what lies at the bibliotherapeutic heart of the model? Discussion and interaction, undoubtedly, as well as emotions and processing emotions? Where did the stages in the model come

from? And how can new research on the reading process be incorporated into it?

#### FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE BIBLIOTHERAPY MODEL

Some additions have been made to the bibliotherapy model. Docent in psychology, and Finnish bibliotherapy theory pioneer, Juhani Ihanus, for example, has addressed the element of literature and reading, the “third element” of that interactive process, a textual transitional object which is of central importance in creative and expressive working. In people’s minds, writing is easily placed in this third space but creativity also has an effect in reading and bibliotherapy. Reading can open up an opportunity to shift from an “empty existence of monologue” to a state of dialogue and polylogue enabled by the views and voices offered by literature (Ihanus 2004, p. 27). On this basis – once it has been possible to enter the state of reading or it has been able to be entered together – it can be claimed that literature opens up the simultaneous existence of alternative perspectives and interpretations of reality, as professor of comparative literature Hanna Meretoja writes in her book *The Ethics of Storytelling* (2018).

In this third space, emotions, meanings and an understanding start to be processed, and the purpose of the bibliotherapeutic process is to process them – working towards exactly this interactivity, in other words exploring the meanings and alternative interpretations through mutual discussion (McCarty Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986/2012;

Ihanus 2004, pp. 27–31). Indeed, Ihanus (2009, p. 25) later headed in this direction, supplementing McCarty Hynes and Hynes-Berry's process model and re-stating its steps and the elements between those steps from the point of view of narrative theory and expression theory. I consider his additions important, emphasising as they do the importance of creative imagination and wordplay and the emergence of a creative expressive state so as to enable identification and further processing. Here this is possibly a question of the "creative reading" to which Leena Sippola (2004, p. 53) refers.

Leena Sippola, who has been running bibliotherapy groups in libraries for years, uses the term creative reading (*kreativt läsande*) (2004). By this she means active and critical reading, unfettered thinking about the viewpoints and emotions offered by the text, an intellectual and emotional reading process that can also affect the reader's mental wellbeing. The question is thus of a creative process taking place while reading. Sippola has examined the reading process in general terms from a psychological viewpoint and identified the elements of the reading event, the most important of which she defines as identification, introjection, projection and catharsis. The foundation here is thus an understanding of reading as a third space or transitional object and the reader's intensive empathising with the text when in that space, "borrowing" the thoughts and feelings conveyed by the text and transferring them to themselves. In catharsis, however, the focus is on emotional cleansing or an experience of alleviation. Rhythm and images, symbols and their impact in the reading event also form a category of their own. (Sippola 2004, pp. 53–57.)

Another researcher, emeritus professor of social work Nicholas Mazza (2003, pp. 17–23), who has been developing poetry therapy, has specified influential elements in the bibliotherapeutic process: reception, expressiveness, and symbolism or ceremonial. By reception he refers to the use of literature and reading in the working situation, while expressiveness refers to writing, and symbolic or ceremonial elements to the ritualistic aspects of the session. He does not elaborate on the practices of reading or processes of creating something new. In Karoliina Kähmi's (2015) thesis on poetry therapy, which draws on Mazza's theories, the connection between reading and metaphor theory remains indistinct and is overshadowed by expressive writing.

#### THOUGHTS ON READING IN LITERARY STUDIES

What remains of a book once it has been read? Images, glimpses, hints? Have I really read the book? What does that mean? Opened it, been absorbed by it? Made it my own? Or has the book read me? Has it forced itself into my head, where it continues its wanderings like a seed or a virus, giving rise to new visions that I would like to escape but cannot? Like a fly larva in my flesh? (Korhonen 2011, p. 35.)

Literature researchers, for their part, have pondered reading – the dynamics and process of reading – in recent decades. In her book *Uses of Literature* (2009) Rita Felski, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, writes about the power of literature that the formal and ultra-critical approach-

es of literary research have not succeeded in quenching: “How is it,” she asks “that black squiggles on a page can conjure up such vivid simulacra of persons, things, actions, places; that readers can experience such powerful sensations and emotions as we react to these shadows and phantasms?” (Felski 2009, p. 61.)

Professor of literature Kuisma Korhonen writes in the same spirit in the quote above – as though reading had never been researched or as if we knew nothing about it. However, reading has been an enduring topic in modern literary research since the 1960s and 1970s, and Felski and Korhonen have themselves written numerous books and articles on the subject.

Literary researcher Siru Kainulainen also shares this ethos of wonder in her book (2015a) on reading poetry. The title of an editorial written by Kainulainen in the online magazine *Kiiltomato* (11.8.2015b) plainly sets out the facts: “We don’t yet know about the interactive experience of reading”. Behind what appears to be a blunt headline are fundamental deliberations and justified questions. If literature or literary fiction is thought of as being interactive, what does that mean? What happens in the interactive state of reading? What happens to me when I read, in the reading event, there in the state of experiencing reading, the third space? How does reading move me? These questions inspired Kainulainen to start researching the reading and reception of modern poetry – but in a way that would also enable attention to be paid to the sensation of the poem, in other words the physical-sensual experience taking place during reading; listening and feeling the voices heard in the text.

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF READING

The deliberations on reading presented above originate in the rupture of the concept of the human or subject in humanistic theories, in fact in a fragmentation or blurring of the understanding regarding the human. In terms of literary research, this concerns the shift from work to text and from author to reader that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. This turning point is associated with a huge number of researchers and thinkers, fields and research focuses both in the US and in Europe, but from today's perspective it seems clear that at this precise moment a modern, pluralistic understanding of reading was produced, the basis on which the questions raised by Felski, Korhonen and Kainulainen draw. I find this discussion in literary theory useful in terms of bibliotherapy.

This understanding – which I will now term here the phenomenology of reading – can roughly be summarised in four theses. One: Reading is not passive but active reception. Two: By reading we create the work actively in relation to ourselves and our own interpretive community. Three: Reading is an all-encompassing mental and somatic event. Four: We change, we create and we shape ourselves in our reading.

Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007) was among the first to systematically research the experiential interaction associated with reading. As he saw it, the meaning of the text is the impact that is experienced. Reading is not passive but an active event in which the text (the written object) and the reader (the reading subject) meet. The text springs to life by being read and similarly the reader fits themselves into the

text; the reader fills gaps in the text, builds the meaning of the text in the light of their own memories, as well as their predictions and imaginings. As reading takes place, the text flows through the reader's mind like a constantly expanding network of connections, through which the meaning of the text is parsed and built – never reaching an overall or final interpretation but always shifting in the light of each encounter. Over his career as an academic, Iser tended to more strongly emphasise the processual nature of reading and the importance of a constantly changing perspective, a kind of moving third space, a moving horizon, as a consequence of which something is brought into the world that previously did not exist (*poiesis*), and as a consequence of which the reader embarks on a transformational process. (Iser 1972/1974; 1976/1978; 2000.) Is this not the same idea that lies at the heart of Sippola's concept of creative reading?

#### THE MOVEMENT OF READING

In the 2000s, Finnish writer Jyrki Vainonen seems in his collection of essays (2014) to already be smoothly stepping in the footsteps of Iser and playing beautifully with the idea of reading as walking. To him it is clear that reading is not merely staying motionless in one place, an action based on the sense of sight, but that when reading, a reader moves mentally and physically. In one essay, Vainonen creates a picture of literature as a place, a landscape of forking paths, in which writer and reader journey, but at different times, unbeknownst to each other. When the reader enters

a landscape that the writer has filtered through their own world of experiences, the reader starts to seek their own route through the world through which the writer has already passed:

The landscape created by the writer and the events the writer has written taking place there are now filtered through a new, different, world of experiences. The words of the landscape are the same but the experience is different, familiar but alien at the same time. When the writer has written about an old tree that spreads its foliage above the garden, the writer might have envisaged an oak. The reader, however, finding their way to the same invented view, might see a maple. And so on. (Vainonen 2014, p. 83.)

Iser's tradition is one of emphasising communication, the encounter that takes place when reading. Many writers and countless literature researchers have subsequently continued and deepened this. I would particularly like to mention researchers Maurice Blanchot and Jean Starobinski in Continental Europe and Paul de Man in the US, who have a phenomenological focus.

In his classic article "Autobiography as De-facement" (1979), Paul de Man (1919–1983) sums up his understanding of the nature of the reading encounter. He writes about reading as a special autobiographical specular moment, as an encounter in which the reading subject draws closer to the other person reflected in the text, which he terms alignment. And like Alice through the Looking Glass, reading can take the reader to some kind of intermediate or dual awareness, often to a third space termed creative or

reflexive, in which the reader is simultaneously inside and outside his or her own self. I read, live and experience a text at the same time as the text “reads” me – influences and shapes me. It is thus possible that when reading, the reading subject encounters in the lines of the text another person in some way similar to themselves – neither identical nor completely different – or some identifiable aspect or thing or emotion and may through this, out of this encounter, bring to themselves something new. (de Man 1979.) To deconstructionists like Paul de Man, this is precisely the revolutionary power of language: in the incessant opportunity for misreading, at the basis of which is language, rhetoric, which is always outside the conscious control of the subject (Savolainen 2011).

#### THE EMOTIONS OF READING

A phenomenologist from a younger generation, Rita Felski is on the same wavelength, but she focuses more attention on the reader and the experiential and affective states and emotions aroused by literature in the reader, especially enchantment and horror. She too writes about the fundamental encounter that takes place in reading and calls this process recognition, something in which familiar and strange, old and new, oneself and another (not oneself) meet. Without referring to the psychology of reading, she defines the encounter as a kind of self-recognition, in which something previously known becomes known again or in a new way: “I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am read-

ing. Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something that I did not see before” (Felski 2009, p. 23.)

Alongside the transformative and revolutionary aspects of language raised by Wolfgang Iser and Paul de Man, Rita Felski thus highlights the opportunity of recognition to create an experience or some kind of internal upheaval: becoming seen and recognised in another’s eyes. According to Felski, this may happen while reading, and that other may be the book and the other speaking within it – in other words the other voice I hear in the text. With its help and through it, I have an opportunity to experience that I am not alone. Thus, in Felski’s view, it is possible to deepen the experience of self (*self-intensification*) or to broaden it (*self-extension*). Felski considers it important to emphasise that recognition is not identification and that the reader’s uniqueness is preserved in the state of recognition and the state of encounter that it creates. (Felski 2009, p. 39.)

The encounter that takes place during reading can also be identification, however, as Sippola (2004) writes, and sometimes even a desire to be absorbed in another person, as Siri Hustvedt, herself a writer conversant with phenomenology writes in her collection of essays *The Shaking Woman*:

The closest we can get to this entrance into another person’s mind is through reading. Reading is the mental arena where different thought styles, tough and tender, and the ideas generated by them become most apparent. We have access to a stranger’s internal narrator. Reading, after all, is a way of living inside another person’s words. His or her

voice becomes my narrator for the duration. Of course I retain my own critical faculties [-] but the more compelling the voice on the page is, the more I lose my own. I am seduced and give myself up to the other person's words. (Hustvedt 2010, p. 148.)

Western literature is, of course, full of examples of readers of the Madame Bovary type, who forget themselves and remain standing on the threshold of their own lives, as author Eila Kostamo writes in her collection of essays (1992). While reading, it is possible to drift into another stream, to be so enchanted as to lose one's own voice. One can immerse oneself in another world. You can also freeze in horror and end up in an almost catatonic state. As well as by Flaubert, this kind of frozen state has been explored by Swedish writer Per Olov Enquist in his prose fiction, including in the novel *Livläkarens besök* (translated into English as *The Royal Physician's Visit*) (see Kosonen 2004).

The above emotional states of reading – enchantment, terror – have been addressed in literary research by virtue of the affective turn which has taken place in humanistic research. This turn too springs as I see it from a phenomenological research tradition. In the area of reading emotions – in identification, sensations, emotions, attachment, convergence, distancing, moving, immersing – we are only taking our first steps, but an ever increasing number of thinkers are addressing the subject.

One of them is Peter Kivy (2006/2009), according to whom reading to oneself can be thought of as an expression that the reader presents to themselves, as an event comparable to a musical performance, the meaning of

which lies in the modality of the voice, the tone of voice, the chime, the flavour brought to the body by the voice. Reading becomes listening, a thought that Laura Wahlfors has developed in her thesis (2013) which brings together literary theory and music theory. It is perhaps no coincidence that inspirations and inventions in British multi-disciplinary research into shared reading are associated with reading out loud (e.g. Billington et al. 2017).

#### TRANSFORMATIVE READING

We move a step closer to bibliotherapeutic practices – perhaps to the basis of identification – with psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas. In his book *Being a Character. Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (1992/1994), he outlines the experience of self and the individual process of change from the point of view of object relations theory. His observations on a third space, a choice of object, and a moment of evocative or intense experience offer further illumination on the process of reading and consideration of its influential mechanisms. Bollas uses literature and reading as one of his examples, but he is in no way a reading theorist. In the debate on the transformative potential of reading, however, he is cited both on the bibliotherapy side and the literary theory side (e.g. Linnainmaa 2009; Campbell 2009).

Object relations theory interprets objects and the world of objects broadly. An object may be another object, a thing or another person. We load the world with our own subjectivity and the people, places, things and events around us with our own idiomatic meanings – knowingly

and unknowingly. We live in a world of our own meanings and we move within it in a field of objects loaded with our own personal meanings. Objects thus carry our individual projections. Also in choosing – knowingly or unknowingly – an object, we put ourselves into it. Our choice of objects is a form of self-expression. “[O]bjects, like words, are there for us to express ourselves” (Bollas 1992/1994, p. 36). When we choose an object – select music to listen to, phone someone, pick up a particular book – we modify our own internal world of experience. New mental tapestries and networks arise that can lead us into unforeseen areas and new ways of being. The object chosen contains the potential to change me. When I choose a book, I may be choosing an object, but once I am engaging with that book – not to mention reading it – it brings its own integrity to our encounter, its own way of being, and affects me in ways that I could not have predicted. (Bollas 1992/1994, pp. 33–46.)

Christopher Bollas distinguishes four areas of self-experience or aspects associated with objects. The first has to do with using the object. Whether this is a question of choosing a novel to read or a person to contact, I use the object; I have chosen it, it is my choice. But the person or novel I choose also changes me. That special nature – the integrity – of the object – shapes me, produces mental images and associations, leads to emotions, actions. This is the second area of self-experience. But if or when I enter into a deep state of experiencing reading, I forget myself, and in a way, there is no separation between the subject using the object and the simple object any more. Now we are in that intermediate area, a third area or space, in which the earlier state

of the subject and the simple integrity of the object have disappeared in an experiential synthesis of mutual interaction. In the fourth area of the self, I examine or reflect on myself as an object, I think where I am or have been. This is the area of the complex self. (Bollas 1992/1994, p. 31.)

Bollas depicts a particularly affective experience of self-transformation by referring to a moment of intense experience, an evocative moment. Such a moment creates a kind of internal chime in the mind or an indeterminate mental state. It is clear to us that this is a significant experience – in some way – but it is difficult to put it into words. The moment may be filled with different images and physical sensations which it is difficult to adequately put into words in a way that would enable us to describe them in a manner that would match our internal experience. (Bollas 1992/1994, pp. 3–4.)

Bollas does not refer to Marcel Proust, but this kind of moment could be precisely the madeleine moment described in his series of novels *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*), an intense and stopping moment in which the particular taste combination of a madeleine cake and lime-flower tea brings to the tongue of the narrator Marcel the feeling of childhood and creates an illusion in his mind that it is possible for him to connect with that now lost past – even feel the essence of an experience of the self in the distant past. Proust as a writer seems to paint word-art from memories and the complexity of describing that moment but according to Bollas, it is more common for no clear memory to emerge at all even if we have experienced something significant (Bollas 1992/1994, pp. 3–7).

In the light of Bollas' object relations theory, it is inter-

esting to pause to consider the process of reading, starting from what kinds of objects each of us would choose for their personal mental tapestry of the self. According to Bollas, people who are open to and rich in terms of self-experience seek objects that possess evocative integrity, in other words art or literature that challenges them. Some people, however, are not keen to or capable of spending time in a third area that conveys an experience. They may underrate other people's evocative and transformative facets and then become narrowed in their choice of object or completely eliminate objects that have a high evocative potential. (Bollas 1992/1994, pp. 31–32.)

From the point of view of a psychoanalyst like Bollas, what is essential is people's capacity to broaden their minds and their lives: the initial state and a potential change to it. Considering the potential for change has not, however, generally been important from a literary theory standpoint. Literary researches do not, of course, see reading as purely a matter of choosing a book as an object, although this does matter too (e.g. Macé 2013), but more as the letters and words, the rhythm and images in the book that may conjure up meanings in our minds in many ways. Nor, according to literature researchers, does all reading contain the same kind of transformative, affective and emotional potential. For example, in the light of the ideas presented by Torsten Pettersson (2009) or in Hanna Meretoja's recent book *The Ethics of Storytelling* (2018), it can be thought that reading literary fiction achieves a quite unique subjective transformation in the reader, derived from the structural integrity of that storytelling object, the novel.

## TOWARDS THERAPEUTIC READING?

Is there anything new in ideas of the phenomenology of reading or Bollas' evocative potential in terms of bibliotherapy? Perhaps, perhaps not. In my understanding, the answer depends on whether you are a bibliotherapy group leader or a bibliotherapist, in other words what your awareness is of the mental dynamic, of the interaction in the group, and so on.

Finally, I will take a closer look at the first stage of the bibliotherapy process, which I find interesting. What kinds of experiences do we, as people who carry out bibliotherapy work, have of recognition? In bibliotherapy, recognition is understood as an undefined feeling taking place at the start of the bibliotherapy process – “there’s something in it”. Is this thus something similar to the phenomenological recognition defined by Rita Felski, referred to above? The group reads the text and when reading, moments arise where we stand still, where we shift. Intersubjective skills are needed – the leader or therapist’s ability to notice the shifts taking place in the members of the group, which we term recognition. Is a shift in bibliotherapy a wordless message or a word, a sentence expressed in a particular voice? And what has actually happened in this reading process? Something significant – termed recognition – has happened in any case and in the working process it is then explored, seeking comparisons and juxtapositions with past experiences, viewpoints and reflections with other members of the group too.

Perhaps the phenomenology of reading can offer bibliotherapists a vocabulary for understanding the reading pro-

cess, outlining its physical-sensual or affective exploration process, as a result of which this kind of inspiration termed recognition is born. Writers have always clad this experience in words, as US author Paul Auster writes in a letter addressed to his writer colleague J. M. Coetzee: “But isn’t reading the art of seeing things for yourself, of conjuring up images in your own head? And isn’t the beauty of reading all about the silence that surrounds you as you plunge into the story, the sound of the author’s voice resonating inside you to the exclusion of all other sounds?” (Auster & Coetzee 2013, p. 13.)

In this quote, Auster refers to the lonely moment of reading but literature and culture researchers have recently also talked a great deal about a changing culture of reading and the communal nature of reading (Ahola 2013; Herkman 2014). Perhaps it is somewhat significant – in an understanding derived from the theory of the interactive nature of reading – that an experience of recognition arising in an individual member of a group, forming an attachment to the text, is not merely a personal and individual experience, but is born of dialogue and interaction – in the light of other meanings and other people’s stories. According to a phenomenological understanding, the recognition that takes place in reading and the realisation of memory that emerges through this process are not merely seen as a personal matter but concern our connection to other people, our ability to recognise others and connect with others. (Felski 2008, pp. 48–49.)

Although the importance of the other and the group is understood very well in the world of therapy, the insight derived from the phenomenology of reading may be signif-

icant namely in terms of strengthening the understanding linked to a sense of community and belonging. The thing that chimes within me has some kind of foundation in the text I am reading, that someone else has written. In my reading, I am not alone, I am with someone else on the basis of the written text and with and through the voices I feel and listen to in reading the text – through its dialogic, about which Mikhail Bakhtin and many others have written. Experiences of recognition are unique and individual, yet at the same time they encompass the power of group discussions, in reflecting similarities, the many different ways in which we are linked to each other.

#### THE NEED FOR BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC READING DATA

It is a delight to carry out bibliotherapy and to constantly be able to experience the influential power of reading and of exploring the texts read in a group, when what is said starts to resonate and create new meanings and insights. There is no doubt that McCarty Hynes and Hynes-Berry's model will continue to prove useful. However, in my article I have sought to surround it with new ideas and observations from the field of literary studies and especially the phenomenology of reading, the scientific wonder at the reading experience.

The theories are only paradigms or philosophies but at the same time necessary ones. To be capable of correcting our own practices, it is necessary to stop and look at what has been lived and done – on what our own work with

reading is based, the kinds of reading methods we use and how. Furthermore, in terms of the common understanding of bibliotherapy, our field, and the development of its theory and practice, it is important to start to put this reading therapy process into words also in theoretical terms, and through this to forge links with those studying other artistic, creative and expressive culture in Finland, the Nordic countries and the rest of the world.

At the moment, research on reading is increasingly multidisciplinary and not only concerns literature researchers and bibliotherapists. In the third and final part of the series, I present new multidisciplinary research on reading and therapeutic reading practices from the UK and Sweden in particular.

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