Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 101-107

‘Reading to heal?’ Some reflections on bibliotherapy from an existential-phenomenological perspective

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ABSTRACT

Currently, there is a growing interest in the UK in using literature in the therapeutic domaine. It is important, when considering how such a ‘Bibliotherapy’ might be developed, to consider antecedents. Engagement with literature probably constitutes the primary ‘therapeutic contact’ for most clients, and the importance of literature has been recognized by many existential-phenomenological writers. Clinical experience provides evidence of the ways in which clients can utilize reading to help them ‘re-story’ aspects of their lived experience, and indicates possible limitations of much North American Bibliotherapy. Here, I want to suggest briefly how an existential-phenomenological attitude might lead us towards forms of therapeutic use of literature which do justice to its disclosing and revelatory potential.

The notion that literature – both reading and writing – may be of therapeutic value has received a good deal of attention recently, both in the professional therapy press and in the popular press. I learned via an article in The Times (October 11, 2003) of the Reading and You Scheme (RAYS), a project initiated in 2000 in the Kirkless and Calderdale areas of West Yorkshire. The idea of the scheme is to promote reading as an alternative to prescription drugs, and to boost self-esteem through one-to-one advice surgeries, conversations about books, and group readings. The initiative evolved after librarians heard numerous reports from borrowers that a book had assisted them in tackling a life problem. ‘Patients’ are referred to a therapist by a network of community psychiatric nurses, health visitors, social workers, occupational therapists and occasionally GPs. Interest in such developments

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has spread South and Dr Phil Ferrand, senior lecturer in health psychology at Plymouth University set up a scheme in 2004 aimed at encouraging GPs to prescribe books on the NHS in an attempt to replace drugs with self-help texts for people diagnosed with 'mild psychological illnesses'. Reporting of this initiative announced a wider applicability:

> *The scheme will see patients with conditions ranging from manic depression to head injuries being sent to their local library rather than the pharmacist. There they will present an NHS "book prescription" form to obtain a loan of a volume most relevant to their condition. Under the scheme, for example, depressives might be prescribed* The Feeling Good Handbook *rather than the Prozac they might previously have received*. (The Sunday Times, December 5, 2004, 1.3)

A further recent acknowledgement of the therapeutic use of reading and writing is provided by Wright in her article 'Words, writing about experience and reading other people's diaries' in the December 2004 edition of the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*. Drawing on her own experience, she provides a brief account of an online counselling via email pilot project in Sheffield. She notes that

> *A lot of therapeutic approaches use writing in therapy: Cognitive Analytic Therapy, for example and narrative therapy, but there is no writing therapy as yet, no equivalent of art, dance and movement or music therapy.* (p. 17)

I find this, personally, quite salutary, since I recall formulating the notion of using literature therapeutically fifteen years ago and, as I thought, arriving at the word 'Bibliotherapy' as a label to designate this new strand of therapy. Some years later, in 1997, I was invited to speak about existential-phenomenological therapy at a conference in Lithuania and at the reception referred to my innovation in conversation with Dr Alexei Alexanovich, the founder of existential therapy in the Baltic States. To my surprise he claimed 'Bibliotherapy' as his own creation with alacrity, stating that he had been successfully teaching it for many years. He does, indeed, lead a short course in this on the Masters Programme at the Institute for Humanistic and Existential Psychology in Birstonas, Lithuania. The syllabus exists only in Russian and I have found it impossible to date to have it translated.

While the term 'Bibliotherapy' may be of fairly recent origin, the activity it denotes is not. The therapeutic function of literature has probably been known since the beginning of written communication, and the oral tradition of storytelling predates even this and still continues in different ways in every culture. It is not without reason that the inscription over the entrance of the Ancient Greek library at Thebes proclaimed it "The healing place of the soul" (Zaccaria and Moses, 1968). Books have functioned for centuries as silent therapists for incalculable numbers. Both factual and fictional writing can provide readers with models to give them insight into the nature of the humans condition and problems of living. We need to acknowledge that for many, perhaps the majority, of clients the first 'therapeutic contact' is not with a psychologist or therapist, but with the written word. As Bernstein asserts:

> *Both adults and children are often the prime seekers of their own help through books, delegating an adult to a lesser role of facilitator. Lest any persons protest they have never sought out books to help themselves, let them think back to a time they hid a book. In some manner, that book probably helped them – by providing information they were afraid or ashamed to seek elsewhere, by clarifying concepts, by explaining a bit of their own lives.* (1989: 159)

Given this it seems remarkable that we have given so little consideration to the implications of this for clinical practice. Rather than engage with this fact in a transparent and coherent manner,

exploring it as a part of the client's journey, it often seems to be relegated to a misty time 'before therapy began'. Such an attitude encourages us to split the client's life up into discrete sections rather than adopt a more holistic perspective or appreciation of the client's 'projects'. It also largely ignores any reading which clients undertake during therapy, unless it is a part of the homework the therapist sets. This splitting is reflected, too, in the arrangement of bookshops and libraries where 'self-help' and 'popular psychology' are generally separated from academic psychology and counselling texts and are certainly separated from fiction, biography, poetry, etc. though texts such as de Botton's popular *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (1997) defy categorization. This is obviously logical – the idea of attempting to find a particular title in an undifferentiated bookstore is clearly absurd – but it also suggests that 'therapeutic texts' really can be distinguished from literature in general.

Such a distinction becomes especially problematic when we consider the way in which existential philosophers have employed literature in order to proselytize. Karl and Hamalian, writing on the "literary manifestations" of existentialism, identify aspects of this philosophy "in writers as different as Tolstoy and Proust, Kafka and Moravia" (1973: 11). What seems to distinguish such literature is a concern on the part of the authors:

> *with individual conduct. Philosophy, for them, is ethical... it is an attempt to create individuals who seek meaningful lives. Even put this way, the existential imagination is not heroic. Its defiance is low-keyed in modulations of character and action. The climax of an existential story is often not a traditional climax at all, but simply a ripple of behaviour, a sense of nausea overcome or experienced, a broken relationship recognized by both parties, a meaningless journey completed to nowhere.* (1973: 17,18)

These qualities may be found throughout literature, and are not confined to the work of contributors to the philosophical movement identified as existentialism. Kaufmann, noting the readiness with which commentators have attributed the label 'existentialist' to widely different revolts against traditional philosophy, argues

> *Many writers of the past have frequently been hailed as members of this [Existentialist] Movement, and it is extremely doubtful whether they would appreciate the company to which they are consigned.* (1956: 11)

Warnock raises a more sophisticated objection to the notion of 'existential literature'. As a philosopher she argues that existentialism

> *Is a kind of philosophy... largely practical in its intentions, and though it has had more impact upon literature than probably any other kind of philosophy, yet there is a point in treating it as a philosophy in some fairly strict sense, in order, among other things, to compare it with other kinds of philosophy.* (1987: 3)

Her concern, clearly, is to differentiate between the ethical voluntarism which engages with human beings as voluntary agents, and Husserlian phenomenology. The 'non-philosophical Existentialist' writer may be influenced by existential philosophy but does not make the, for Warnock, necessary connection with phenomenology:

> *The non-philosophical Existentialist will share the common interests of his philosophical cousin, but he will not share a method. This is not just a matter of what form he chooses to write in, but rather of whether or not he is attempting a* systematic *account of man's connection with the world.* (1989: 3)

I think we would have to acknowledge that this stipulation leaves very little fiction beyond that of Sartre which can be included under the rubric 'philosophical Existentialism' – and perhaps not even very much of Sartre's work achieves a *systematic* account.

Caute, in his Introduction to *What is Literature?* states Sartre's key theme:

> *The writer should propose in each work a concrete liberation on the basis of a specific situation.*
>
> *The thesis is clear: literature, properly employed, can be a powerful means of liberating the reader from the kinds of alienation which develops in particular situations.* (1986: ix)

I will not attempt, here, any in-depth analysis of the workings of *littérature engagée*, but will merely note the example given by Caute of Rocquentin's struggle with his sense of absurdity in *Nausea*:

> *Sartre... believed that the literary exploration of such a condition, if penetrating and truthful, has the therapeutic value of helping the reader to identify and transcend his alienation.* (ibid: xi)

The distinction between a 'philosophical' and a 'non-philosophical' Existentialism is an interesting one for a further reason, which is the danger that a writer's preoccupation with a systematic account may lead to an aridity or even dogmatism which mitigates against the practical assistance in living they seek to offer. The analogy might be with directive versus non-directive therapy, each approach has advantages but may alienate some clients. With regard to directness, Maquarrie reminds us that

> *There has been much literary production independent of any direct or even indirect philosophical influence from the existentialists, yet itself 'existentialist' in its affinities and sometimes coming to exert an influence on the philosophers. One thinks, for instance, of the impact that Holderlin's poetry has made upon Heidegger.* (1973: 262)

In practice, (and as a clinician I find it invaluable to attend to the lessons clients offer me), I have found clients draw on a wide range of literature to help them make sense of their lives. Clients frequently bring literature into the consulting room, both literally and metaphorically. The stories of two clients immediately come to mind. The first, 'John', talked about how reading *The Dead*, the final short story in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, helped him to come to a new understanding of feeling trapped in a loveless marriage. For him the crucial element of his reading was that he could identify his feelings as similar to those of Gabriel, the husband in the story, and realize that these feelings had been felt before and were part of the human condition. I would say that the text 'mirrors' the client's experience in a way which a therapist does not, and perhaps, cannot.

The second client, 'Susan', was questioning her sexuality. She brought Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* into sessions because she identified with the despair felt by Stephen, the book's protagonist. For her this character expressed what until then had been impossible to give voice to. It seems to me that for these and other clients literature had the function of raising awareness and providing a sense of connectedness to a community of suffering, or more broadly, a community of experience.

The relationship between 'John', 'Susan' and other clients, and the text is idiosyncratic and defies assimilation into a specific and concrete 'Bibliotherapy method'. It is, rather, complex and subjective, and seems to be part of a journey of (self-)discovery which can be supported or hindered by the nature of the therapeutic alliance. I find myself resonating with Libby Perves when she points out that literature which has an *oblique* rather than a direct relevance to a particular problem of living is of the greatest value. Citing the example of the experience of divorce, she states that it is "liberating to read something different but weirdly parallel (Today, Radio 4, 9.12. 2004). Among the books discussed in this interview was Margaret Attwood's *The Handmaiden's Tale*, a bleak feminist

futuristic novel which postulates a world where there are no men and women have to come to alternative arrangements for biological reproduction. In doing so it engages indirectly with notions of relationship and identity.

I would contend that there is another parallel here. The development of different ways of using texts therapeutically and the extent to which they influence and interpenetrate each other is remarkably similar to the reaction of American humanistic psychology to the European existential tradition. Yalom articulates the American view:

> *The European focus is on limits, on facing and taking into oneself the anxiety of uncertainty and non-being. The humanistic psychologists, on the other hand, speak less of limits and contingency than of development of potential, less of acceptance than of awareness, less of anxiety than of peak experiences and oceanic oneness, less of life meaning than of self-realization, less of apartness and basic isolation than of I-Thou and encounter.* (1980: 19)

The tragic dimension of existence, then, largely gives way to a pragmatic, technique-based approach; the 'community of suffering' is replaced by individual striving towards self-actualization. This may, in part, relate to the largely Catholic heritage of Continental Europe which places an intermediary clergy – a community of religious advice and support – between the individual and their existential anxieties. In comparison, the dominant Protestant ethic of North America places responsibility for the searching of the soul on the individual. England seems to stand with a foot in both camps, though erring towards an American perspective.

Much of North American bibliotherapy appears to be aimed at specific discrete 'problems'. As Pardeck and Pardeck explain

> *... clinicians have found that bibliotherapy helps clients conduct self-examinations and provides them with insight into countless types of problems...* (1992: 1)

Little attention is paid to existential givens. Stanley, at the most optimistic and pragmatic end of the spectrum, considers bibliotherapy to be a 'science' (1995:4). She provides recommendations or 'bookscriptions' for readers seeking guidance on subjects as specific and as amorphous as, for example, 'Creativity', 'Coping With a Chronic Illness', 'Addiction and Recovery', 'Mental Illness', 'Self-Esteem' and 'Discovering Your Life's Mission'. Holbrook Jackson, an English commentator, provides a fictitious corrective to the reliance on obsessive taxonomy in his earlier text, *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (1950). Inspired by Robert Burton's 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy*, he addresses the notion of books as pharmaceutical products in chapters with titles such as 'Books as Soporifics', 'Their Medicinal Properties Generally Considered', 'Preservatives and Prophylactics', and 'The Cure of Megrims, Melancholy and like Distempers'.

Approaches such as that adopted by Stanley are clearly more humanistic than existential, where the emphasis is less on problem solving than on the development of a greater appreciation of what it means to be human – an appreciation which provides an indirect route to engage with difficulties just as 'oblique' literature may prove more liberating than self help texts. From an existential perspective we might note how, paradoxically, the notion of scientific bibliotherapy appears on the one hand to offer the individual a powerful way of treating him/herself, without the necessity of deferring to an 'expert' such as a psychiatrist, while on the other hand implying pathology and producing specific 'drugs' to address the reader's symptoms.

An existential perspective, in cautioning against treating books homeopathically, suggests some elements which are central to the therapeutic use of books, rather than a specific method. An existential-phenomenological attitude might, I would argue, lead us to approach bibliotherapy naively and turn our attention back to the purpose of literature *viz a viz* the human condition. As Cohn reminds us

> *... existence is an attribute of human beings alone. It is the particular way in which human beings are – because for them alone their existence is an issue, they can reflect on it, they can relate to it. It is their most important attribute...* (1999: 42)

and,

> *The existential-phenomenological view does not construct any explanatory models but tries to understand situations by exploring the immediate experience which is not seen as originating in one individual person but always in a world of human beings.* (1999: 43)

An existential perspective would acknowledge the context of the client's reading and view it as a dimension of their way of engaging with their past, being in the present, and imagining a future. Their reading prior to entering into a relationship with a human therapist would no longer exist in some unconsidered time 'prior to therapy', but would be considered as one of the ways they relate to the world and create meaning. The act of reading, then, is situated among those other activities whereby human beings, uniquely, reflect on Being. Heidegger, writing about artistic creation in general, views it as

> *an act of revelation or unconcealedness regarding the truth of our existence; it is the means of 'unveiling' that which is present but is also ordinarily hidden from everyday awareness. Expressions of art are able to bring us the truth of being.* (2000: 7-15)

Spinelli, noting this *illuminative quality* of creation, considers its significance for the audience. He reminds us, first, that May views artistic creation as an encounter between the artist and their "pattern of meaningful relations in which a person exists and in the design of which he or she participates" (1975: 18) – an encounter which is invariably anxiety-provoking. This anxiety

> *is fundamentally revelatory and thus capable of breaking down not only one's previously held conceptions and values, but also one's constructed identity.* (1975: 18)

The artist's anxiety, then, has a dual function, that of illuminating Being, and of loosening their restricted patterns of relationship:

> *... artistic activity may well provide a means whereby the sedimentations and dissociations in the experienced self-structure become open to challenge (if only temporarily) so that novel, and more 'liberating', self/world interrelations are experienced by the artist.* (2001: 139)

And what, then, of the reader? If we consider the reader to be taking part in this 'artistic activity' too then the act of reading might be seen to have a similarly 'therapeutic' function.

> *Creativity contains strong elements of the mysterious and the unexpected. Even when the artist's end goal is clear, various novel routes, events and possibilities emerge seemingly out of nowhere, yet whose potential impact can alter the whole aim, goal, meaning or resolution of the work. And, just as significantly, those who make up the audience for an act of creation share some degree of this plunge into a transcendent unknown.* Their relationship with the work also permits their 'truths' to emerge, and confront and transform. (Spinelli, 2001: 142) [My emphasis]

An existential-phenomenological approach to bibliotherapy, I would argue, is uniquely positioned to raise questions about the ways in which therapists and clients can enter into a relationship with texts which foreground their illuminative quality and harness this to open up our habitual ways of being-in-the-world.

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