

READING AND TRANS-READING. A BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Abstract: This paper takes a new “trans” approach to the issues of reading literary fiction; it goes beyond a transdisciplinary approach, into a *trans-functional* one, investigating the way literature surpasses its initial function and works therapeutically, in the form of bibliotherapy, compensating for certain human psychological frailties and providing psychological explanations for the mechanisms involved. In this sense, reading can be understood as a form of *trans-reading*. Psychological studies demonstrate that the therapeutic reading of literature can be a valuable source of psychological understanding of human condition and its existential dilemmas. Moreover, a carefully guided excursion through the gallery of fictional works may provide relief from certain psychological disorders. The conclusions of such studies impact directly on the role of the comparatist, as well as of the psychologist. The article draws upon the analyses of Freud, Jung, and Yalom and tackles new trends in the field of bibliotherapy.

Key words: trans-reading, bibliotherapy, transdisciplinary, trans-functional, psychology, Jung, Freud

Time has come for comparative literature to spread its wings towards a “trans-” approach, be it transdisciplinary, transgender, transnational, transmedial or transcultural. What was initially just a trend, just a recommendation for the few brave ones out there, has become a requirement over the past decade. “Comparative literary studies need to become transdisciplinary, embracing an intellectual mode of inquiry that seeks to get beyond binary coordinates” (3), postulates Paul Jay (2014) in an article on the state of the discipline, also maintaining that simple, old comparatism can pose a threat to differences, in an attempt to make their commonality the basis of its analysis.

Jessica Berman's (2014) idea of the decade challenges the readers to expand the concept of “«*trans*» critical perspectives” to an entire “«orientation» of critical approaches” (1), in which the trans approach can simultaneously act upon two levels, for instance a trans orientation can be at the same time transnational and transdisciplinary “It is the transdisciplinary nature of the new comparatist work (...) that marks its difference from the older comparatist model, precisely because transdisciplinarity requires a *transgressing* of the laws of that older model.” (Jay 2014, 4)

But this transgressing of laws can also mean going beyond a transdisciplinary analysis, into a change of functions, into a *trans*-functional approach, that stipulates that fictional literature is more than just a form of entertainment and that it can also be therapeutic. Within this transfunctional model, mere reading becomes *trans*-reading, an assumed, guided approach of fictional literature, transgressing its aesthetic function, only to fulfil a more pragmatic purpose, i.e. that of serving psychological needs. If literature can provide illustrations of psychological concepts and theories, why can it not cure some of our psychological frailties?

Analysing literary fiction and reading from a multicultural-transfunctional perspective, the right question to ask about bibliography would be that of James Clifford, “Where are you between?” that replaces the classical question “Where are you from?” (quoted in Bernheimer 1995, 12).

This thing called “bibliotherapy”. The early years

The history of bibliotherapy begins, according to most accounts, with the article *The Literary Clinic*, written by Samuel McChord Crothers and published in the September 1916 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. What starts as an incredible story of a peculiar character, Bagster, and his Bibliopathic Institute, turns out to be a well-substantiated discourse pleading for a new form of therapy, which even though not practiced by physicians or psychologists, has proven to be beneficial for diverse psychological sufferings.

The idea for this new form of therapy came to Bagser – a minister who had missed the opportunity to go into psychotherapy – with the realization of the deepest human need to hold

on to the right thoughts and ideas, in order to keep one's sanity. This comes with a prerequisite:

To be interesting, a thought must pass through the mind of an interesting person. In the process something happens to it. It is no longer an inorganic substance, but it is in such form that it can easily be assimilated by other minds. It is these humanized and individualized thoughts that can be profitably held.

Then it struck me that this is what literature means. Here we have a stock of thoughts in such a variety of forms that they can be used, not only for food, but for medicine. (Crothers, 1916, 292)

The core idea of the new system developed by Bagster – *Biblio-therapeutics* – lies in classifying books according to their therapeutic value and not to their genre, thus changing the traditional role of the literary critic to a healer who has to diagnose the conditions of his “patients” and prescribe them books that should work as medicines.

Surpassing their literary value and their meaning as entertainment tools, books can be either “stimulants”, “stirring emotion and leading to action”, “counter-irritants”, meant to irritate one part of our brain, in order to counteract an ailment of another part, or “antipyretics”, acting as cooling agents (Crothers 1916, 294). “My method has been purely empirical.” (297), Bagster confesses, but the explanations he gives for the underlying mechanisms of his biblio-therapeutics follow precise pharmaceutical formulas, in which certain medicines, i.e. books, may have unintended side-effects that can only be reduced or discarded by the prescription of new medicines, i.e. books. A much too miserable state of mind induced by reading novels as a cure for an aversion to “social betterment” (296) should be balanced by a milligram of Bernard Shaw's gentle irony.

Bagster's display of case studies follow a psychological protocol similar to the one utilized nowadays in psychology: the “patients” names are substituted with their initials, critical details of their personal lives are indicated, avoiding redundancy, the therapist's personal notes following a first meeting accompany the description, a narration of the most relevant part of the dialogue between the “therapist” and the “patient”, as well as the prescribed medicine.

Bagster's exquisite theory of literary antitoxins is of great relevance for today's societal context: every society in every age seems to be suffering from a particular malady that enforces a general and erroneous tendency in thinking and feeling. Only the strongest minds can stand its influence, by producing protecting antitoxins. The surplus of antitoxins can be used for the benefit of the intoxicated and comes in the form of books. Thackeray fought against his time's ailment, snobbery and wrote *The Book of Snobs*, Plutarch's literary antitoxin, *Lives* was the antidote of imperialism.

"One great use of the antitoxins is in the treatment of various forms of bigotry", declares Bagster (Crothers 1916, 300) and I take it upon myself to say that this might be the all-time malady of humanity. Bagster's treatment plan starts with transforming the blind attachment of a bigot to its ideas into an assumed one, followed by its immersion into ideas of the opposite side.

Bibliotherapy has its limits: Only one disease cannot find its cure and that is intolerance. Because it only hurts the people around him, and not the ignorant himself, he almost never asks for help (Crothers 1916, 300).

The School of Life

100 years and a technological revolution later, we find Bagster's Bibliopathic Institute reincarnated as *The School of Life*, a global educational site with a multiplying number of local campuses (London, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Berlin, Istanbul, Melbourne, Paris, Sao Paulo, Seoul, Sydney, Taipei, Tel Aviv, Zurich), dedicated to educating humans about life – their life –, i.e. to teaching them how to master aspects of life that are not taught in any traditional school, "to developing emotional intelligence through the help of culture" (The School of Life). The philosopher Alain de Botton, one of the founders of the School of Life explains in an interview that he recognised the need for such a school that could teach non-academic, yet vital skills and acted upon it: "I wanted to make the school a one-stop shop for information about the area of life I call emotional intelligence." (Matousek 2013)

The School's website offers videos, classes, a page dedicated to businesses and their owners and a series of articles, compiled under *The Book of Life*. Six main chapters form the Book of Life: Capitalism, Work, Relationships, Self, Culture and Curriculum, each of them

including short articles and videos meant to explain different aspects of everyday life and, what is more important, to question readily delivered statements and opinions and to offer alternatives to what we think we already know.

“What is literature for?” is a short video that advertises literature and pleads for a different approach of literary fiction, not as a mere entertainment tool, but as therapy, as “time saver” and “reality simulator” (The School of Life).

The ideas spread in different articles and videos materialized under the form of a book, *The Cure Novel*, a collection of 751 recommendations of books to be “taken”, i.e. “read” for each mental or physical ailment. The authors Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin (2014) formulate their mission statement in a two-page introduction, not to waste the reader’s time, allowing her to dive right into the prescription book, to browse through it or go straight to her displeasing ailment:

We are bibliotherapists, and the tools of our trade are books. Our apothecary contains Balzacian balms and Tostoyan tourniquets, the salves of Saramago and the purges of Perec and Proust. To create it we have trawled two thousand years of literature for the most brilliant minds and restorative reads, from Apuleius, second-century author of *The Golden Ass*, to the contemporary tonics of Ali Smith and Jonathan Franzen. (xi)

As to the cure mechanism that remedies lovers of novels, the authors invoke several aspects that they consider curative: the subject of the novel, the writer’s style, the characters or a mere idea, the capacity of the novel “to transport you to another existence and see the world from a different point of view” (Berthoud and Elderkin 2014, xii). The authors of *The Novel Cure* include loneliness among their ailments to be cured, suggesting that every lonely reader should indulge himself in the *Northern Lights* (Philip Pullman), *I, Claudius* (Robert Graves) and *Tales of the City* (Armistead Maupin) (223).

The authors’ succinct indication of the cure mechanisms employed by bibliotherapy is unsatisfactory, but we suggest the psychological concepts of *modelling* and *vicarious learning* as helpful explanations. The process of modelling denotes imitating someone’s behaviour and allowing changes to happen as a result of imitation. The model is usually a person whom we

admire; in the case of reading novels, modelling targets a favourite character, that triggers the change most likely to happen outside our awareness.

The second psychological mechanism – the vicarious leaning – is a concept developed by Albert Bandura, that describes the process of learning the consequences of actions by observing someone else performing the action and being rewarded or punished for that. Besides modelling a character's behaviour, this mechanism can also initiate change, when the consequences are vividly depicted in the novels.

There is no doubt that *The School of Life* promotes a new ideology, manufactured for the constantly busy, time-lacking, stressed and purposeless modern man, offering him just enough condensed information that he can digest in the short breaks that he takes from being busy, but isn't an ideology that favours culture instead of consumerism and offers alternative therapies (food as therapy, travel as therapy) preferable?

It all begins with Freud

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories no longer shine under the spotlights of today's mainstream in psychology. His concepts were defeated by the methodological requirements of the later scientific paradigms that favoured the scientist-practitioner model practiced in medicine. What we seem to forget is that by raising certain issues and formulating his innovative concepts, Freud launched a series of ardent debates that eventually lead to the birth of new psychology paradigms and schools.

Freud was among the first to intuit that there is more about literature than what meets the eye and he provided us with skilful samples of psychoanalytic interpretations of literary works. All the same, he understood literary works as a unique opportunity to glimpse into the writer's personality and to make a detailed X-ray of his character, such as he does in *Dostoevsky and Parricide* (Freud, 1961). Based on an analysis of his work, mainly of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Freud identifies four components of Dostoevsky's personality: the creative writer, the neurotic, the moralist and the sinner (177-178), each of them being supported by autobiographical facts and, most importantly, by characters from his novels that Dostoevsky invested with facets of his own psychological make-up.

Dostoevsky's creativity does not require much explanation and Freud includes *The Brothers Karamazov* in the top three literary masterpieces, along with Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is the other personality traits that may raise some eyebrows. Dostoevsky's morality was anything but glorious and a mere failed attempt at rising above any moral doubt, while his criminal trait is supported – says Freud – by his choice of characters and violent subjects. The sinner comes forward in his sadist-masochistic tendencies towards himself, in his self-tormenting enterprises and towards the others, readers including, granting them no tolerance whatsoever. These character traits that make him into an “instinctual character” (Freud 1961, 179) are a “perfect” match for Dostoevsky's neurosis, a sign of his split ego, which leaves perhaps the strongest mark on his literary writings.

One might argue that Freud's observations on Dostoevsky's personality were drawn from his autobiography, letters and journals and that might apply if only the unconscious were accessible to our conscious life. “So alien to our consciousness are the things by which our unconscious mental life is governed!” (Freud 1961, 184). Following the psychoanalytical logic, the writer's own account of his life might have been censored by the superego and might present an improved, thus falsified image of himself. Even so, the unconscious found another means of true expression, i.e. in the writer's fictional work, in his characters and in their life experiences.

Freud was not a promoter of bibliotherapy, he did not recommend that we read novels to cure our psyche, but literature is much indebted to him for recognising its psychological value and making a connection between the two subjects.

Jung and the analytical approach

Jung's understanding of the work of art, in general, and of literature, in particular, and the significance he assigns to psychology as a tool for interpreting literary symbols and meanings, known as analytical psychology, opposes Freud's method, which he regards as too reductive and medical, because of its investigation techniques – the same as those employed for analysing the psychic phenomena of the unconscious – and because of its tendency to study the work of art as subject of human psychology. What Jung proposes is to eliminate this medical perspective on art, “for a work of art is not a disease, and consequently requires a

different approach” (Jung, *On the Relation* 1966, 71), delineating, at the same time, the psychologist’s mission in relation to art: to be concerned mainly with its meaning and to adopt a determinant approach only if it contributed to its better comprehension.

“The practice of art is a psychological activity”, Jung confesses (*On the Relation* 1966, 65), but this statement does not make the psychological approach in any way easier, because of the antipodal natures of art and psychology: “Art by its very nature is not science, and science by its very nature is not art.” (66). Thus, any interpretation of art through the psychological lens has to carefully observe its non-scientific nature and confine to the process of artistic creation, without referring to its content.

The creative urge that puts the whole creative process into motion and which Jung calls “autonomous complex” (*On the Relation* 1966, 75) stems from the personal unconscious, until sufficient energy is poured into it, so it can pass into the consciousness. This urge is an expression of the primordial images common to all mankind – the archetypes –, which form the collective unconscious. The value of these archetypes resides in their quality as vehicles of “human psychology and human fate” (81), as they express similar experiences that recur with consistency in human history. Due to their generally valid meaning and applicability – they surpass the idea of individual and express an ideal that is shared by human race –, they allow a unitary interpretation of the works of art. The archetype “transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind” (82). This transcendent ability, this detachment from the personal expression poured into the work of art is the prerequisite of any analytical interpretation of the work of art: But for the purpose of cognitive understanding we must detach ourselves from the creative process and look it from the outside; only then does it become an image that expresses what we are bound to call “meaning”. (78)

In his essay “Psychology and Literature” (1966), Jung makes a beautiful plea in favour of the importance of literature, as an expression of the human psyche, to psychology, as a science dedicated to understanding human behaviour. Even though psychology has officially claimed its place among the sciences of mankind, based on its dogmatic scientific rigour, the psychology researcher has to keep in mind the fact that his hypotheses can rarely be inferred to more general categories of behaviour. They are only a singular “first expression” (85) of a behaviour sample, that cannot account for the multiple manifestations of the human psyche. Its understanding requires a richer investigation of the multi-faces of the psyche’s expression,

those “mirrors” (85), as Jung calls them, resulting in a complex kaleidoscope of harmoniously interrelated images.

The psychologist is therefore obliged to make himself familiar with a wide range of subjects, not out of presumption and inquisitiveness but rather from love of knowledge, and for this purpose he must abandon his thickly walled specialist fortress and set out on the quest for truth. He will not succeed in banishing the psyche to the confines of the laboratory or of the consulting room, but must follow it through all those realms where its visible manifestations are to be found, however strange they may be to him. (85)

Jung’s theory calls for a reverted approach: as “mirror” of the human psyche, literature holds great truths about the human behaviour; its artistic nature excludes a scientific investigation, but it can support psychology in its understanding and improvement of psychic dysfunctions.

Yalom’s existential psychology

The therapist and storyteller Irvin Yalom masterfully blends psychology and literature, both in theory, as well as in practice. His two essays, *Literature Informing Psychology: Literary Vignettes* (1998) and *Psychology Informing Literature: Ernest Hemingway: A Psychiatric View* (1998) complement each other, suggesting a unitary vision on life, to whose understanding and analysing both literature and psychology play an important part. It is not about the competition between two different areas that are seemingly irreconcilable – psychology, serving reality and literature, synonym to fiction – but the collaboration between two life-long partners: psychology delivers the explanation, while literature embellishes and illustrates the theory.

Besides the credit given to the first philosophers, who were also the first psychologists of mankind, long before the rise of scientific psychology, Yalom acknowledges the merits of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Mann, Sartre and Camus, whom he considers “psychological novelists” (Yalom, *Literature* 1998, 269) and praises them for their powerful insights into the human

psychology. From the examples that the therapist gives to support his statement, I will refer here to the concept of isolation and its three facets: the “interpersonal isolation”, or what is commonly referred to as loneliness, the “intrapersonal isolation”, defined as the feeling of inner fracture, of split self, and the “existential isolation” (270), an experience brought over by the idea of death. Most psychology paradigms and schools have developed therapies and methods to cure the first two forms of loneliness, and successfully in numerous cases, leaving what Yalom calls “existential isolation” to be handled almost exclusively by existential psychology. The therapist chooses a medieval play – *Everyman* – to best exemplify the existential isolation crises in one’s life, and a fragment from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* to express what often is conceived as a solution by people experiencing it: the need of others, to justify our own existence, the feeling that one exists only in the presence of others that may witness its life (270-271).

In his second essay on Hemingway, Yalom (1998) makes use of his psychodynamic expertise to analyse the writer’s life, ended in suicide, and his complex work that mirrored his inner struggles. Even though Hemingway raised some important existential questions – meaning of life, death – his worldview does not possess the “universality and timelessness” (Yalom, Psychology 1998, 285) that we see in Tolstoy, Conrad or Camus, and the therapist explains these limitations through Hemingway’s personal ordeal. Hemingway, the writer and the man were joined together by the same effort to reach an idealised image of himself, through his personal adventures and experiences, and, at the same time, through his characters.

Yalom uses Karen Horney’s theory on the idealized image of the self to explain how this construct of the human psyche launches a never-ending chase of the imago: when parents deprive their child of the basic acceptance that is vital for his autonomous development, the child becomes chronically anxious and develops an idealized image of the self, that he thinks he has to fulfil in order to escape anxiety. And in Hemingway’s case, “the idealized image crystallized around a search for mastery, for a vindictive triumph which would lift him above others” (Yalom, Psychology 1998, 289). Besides the experience of deep isolation and the inner conflict of the self, the development of such an inaccessible imago has life-long negative consequences: self-hatred, self-destructive mechanisms, self-torment. Hemingway was no exception; he failed in the areas that were most important to his idealized image: “self-

sufficiency, physical injury and integrity, women and mature love” (Yalom, Literature 1998, 296), and life took its negative course one step at the time: self-hatred, anxiety and depression, and, finally, suicide:

Finally Hemingway grew to regard his body and his life as a prison of despair from which there was only one exist – and that exist, suicide, the most ignoble one of all. [...] It was the act that no Hemingway hero had ever done. (Yalom, Psychology 1998, 304)

Following Freud’s and Jung’s tradition, Yalom brings the relation between psychology and literature a step further, equalizing their contributions to understanding human behaviour and making use of literary fiction in his writings and in his practice.

Bringing in the heavy artillery

As with any literary-psychological debatable issue, it is the task of the science-based psychology to confirm empirically the points made by the literary critic. Psychologists have often regarded fiction as a valuable pool of various behavioural manifestations, of psychic conflicts and multiple personalities, but for a long time they lacked the adequate means to include fiction among their therapeutic tools. Nowadays, psychology testing proves to be up for the task and formulates the literary intuitions as work hypotheses.

A study on the impact of reading fiction on human emotions concluded that people with avoidant attachment – characterised by negative emotionality, increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system, and possible long-term detrimental effects on health – benefitted by the exposure to a short story, *The Lady with the Toy Dog* by Chekhov, as opposed to those required to read a documentary with the same content: the high avoidant participants experienced great emotional changes, as well as an increased level of self-reported happiness. What made the difference in effect between the short story and the comparison text and made the subjects defenceless against art was “the artistic form, rather than content” (Djikic et al. 2009, 14), the explanation being that art is able to elicit idiosyncratic and complex responses in humans, allowing them to explore their emotionality, a quality that is lacked by documentary or scientific texts.

The preferred type of reading material – fiction versus nonfiction – has also been taken under investigation in a study intended to demonstrate the effects of exposure to fiction *versus* nonfiction writings, on empathy and social ability. The narrative form of fiction and its social nature claim a good ability of understanding human relationships, and this ability is either maintained or reinforced by the reading of fiction, thus making “bookworms” (readers of fiction) more empathic and more agile socially, as opposed to “nerds” (readers of expository texts), who are more withdrawn from the social world (Mar et al. 2006). The study involved 94 participants and some of the writers that were included in the Author Recognition Test are José Saramago, Yukio Mishima, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Umberto Eco, Milan Kundera, Albert Camus, Italo Calvino, and Thomas Mann.

Another study by two of the same researchers (Mar and Oatley, 2008) proposed the hypothesis that narrative literatures fulfil more than just an entertainment function and that they are “simulations of selves in the social world” (173), i.e. the readers experience emotions generated by the narrated facts, that model events and circumstances not accessible to the reader in real life. As such, fiction compresses reality with all its social information, to be better understood and then generalized to other instances, and in doing so, it facilitates the communication of social knowledge. The article makes a meta-analysis of the psychological experiments that investigated the functions of fiction and the way it relates to psychology, coming to the conclusion that writers of fiction and research psychologists have a common job: that of understanding human behaviour and its mechanisms, “which might bring members of the departments of psychology and of literature closer together.” (188)

To rule out critiques that the connection between exposure to fiction and empathy was caused by a personality trait, Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) conducted a study that controlled statistically the traits most likely to affect this outcome: openness and fantasy. Not only was the hypothesis confirmed, but other aspects of social life were also investigated: loneliness and social network size, that correlated negatively with the exposure to fiction.

The need for cognitive closure, understood as the necessity to reach a conclusion quickly when making decisions, and a reduced tolerance for ambiguity and vagueness of information inhibits rationality – as functional fixedness –, as well as creativity. A study conducted by Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu (2013) demonstrated that reading fiction leads to a “opening of the closed mind” (149), thus reducing the need for cognitive closeness.

Moreover, reading fictional literature leads to better information processing and better creativity.

The short- and long-term effects of reading novels on brain connectivity were also investigated in a study that required participants to read *Pompeii: A Novel*, by Robert Harris, chosen because it depicts historical events, narrated as fiction. Several functional magnetic resonance imaging scans were taken during the “washin” period (the first 5 days of resting state), the “washout” period (the last 5 days of resting state) and during the 9 days of reading approximately 1/9th the novel. Comparing the scan images from the washin and washout days with those taken during the reading period, the researchers established short-term increases in connectivity in the left angular / supramarginal gyri and in the right posterior temporal gyri, on the days after the reading. These areas were classically associated with perspective taking and story comprehension. Long-term changes in brain connectivity were observed in the somatosensory cortex, suggesting the existence of a mechanism called “embodied semantics”, as well as a strengthening of the language processing regions due to reading (Berns et al. 2013).

McMillen and Pehrsson (2004) draw attention to the fact that psychologists using bibliotherapy in their practice have a psychodynamic orientation. The mechanisms that are thought to explain the effectiveness of the method are *universalization* – the reader’s identification with the characters –, *abreaction* – the emotional catharsis experienced by the characters and the readers, at the same time – and *integration* – the insight that the characters and their experiences have to offer (4).

As concerns the behavioural-cognitive therapy, the mainstream in today’s psychological theory and practice, bibliotherapy is mostly limited to the use of self-help books, but with the ascend of the third wave of this paradigm, that opened the research towards new concepts – mindfulness, Buddhist psychology, acceptance and commitment therapy –, a new DSM and new definitions of the mental illness, there is hope that literary fiction will be included among its therapeutic tools.

The author’s recommendation

Richard Gerrig (1993) explained the experience of reading by using two metaphors: the metaphor of “being transported” and the metaphor of “performing that narrative” (2). The experience of being transported is the common sensation that a person has when she allows herself to be psychologically moved into another world, by the object of her admiration: a book, a painting, a movie, etc. In case of books and fiction, we talk about being transported into a different narrative world: “a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now” (3).

When speaking of the literary experience of being transported, Gerrig (1993) delineates six steps:

1. Someone (“the traveller”) is transported.
2. by some means of transportation
3. as a result of performing certain actions.
4. The traveller goes some distance from his or her world of origin
5. which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible.
6. The traveller returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey. (10-11)

The experience of the traveller being transported is accompanied by a cognitive transformation, by taking over specific features of the world he enters by the means of transportation – in this case fictional literature - that she herself has required, after having performed certain actions. Gerrig (1993) stresses the non-passivity of the reader, because the idea of metaphor implies passivity and this is not the case. The first meaning given to the distance between the world of origin and the narrative world bears on the readers’ intuitions about what of the real world applies to the narrative world, while the second meaning is determined by the fact that “we are strictly prohibited from affecting the course of action in narrative worlds” (14). While immersed into the narrative world, the world of origin loses its outlines, because of the partial isolation that the reader experiences; upon her return, she is changed.

The performance action of the reader receives special attention. Gerrig (1993) finds similarities between the reader and the actor, as both are endowed with certain skills that they have to exercise: “They must use their own experiences of the world to bridge gaps in texts. They must bring both facts and emotions to bear on the construction of the world of the text.” (17). This performance action draws its force from the pre-existing experience and knowledge

of the reader, but a great deal of it does not require the reader's conscious attention: "a great number of «performance» acts are sufficiently routinized to take place outside of awareness." (19)

Gerrig (1993) makes use of two of Wolfgang Iser's rationales in order to explain the performance metaphor: the readers "must fill the gaps authors leave in their texts" (20), while doubling their personality, as the performance means being yourself and also being someone else. Gerrig is not concerned with the expert reader, his theories do not require a reader with a well-polished expertise, and this makes his theory so accessible and applicable in the context of bibliotherapy, that means prescribing books for the average reader.

I will now put on the bibliotherapist coat and make a first attempt at recommending a novel: Eric-Emanuel Schmitt's (2015) *Three Women in a Mirror*, to be read when in doubt as to who we are and who society wants us to be.

The novel tells successively the story of three characters, Anne, Hanna and Anny, three unconventional women, each living in a different time and each fighting the oppression of societal roles assigned inequitably to women. The young, saint Anne of the sixteenth century Flanders escapes her marriage and her role as a wife and mother and finds God in nature; Hanne, the wealthy aristocrat living in Vienna, in the beginning of the twentieth century doesn't find personal fulfilment in motherhood and, after getting a divorce, starts her career as a psychoanalyst; Anny is the addicted Hollywood star in search for the meaning of life beyond money and celebrity. What connects the three women and makes them facets of the same self is their feeling of inadequacy and misplacement. Anne, Hanne and Anny begin a journey of self-search that ends dramatically for Anne and Hanne. Anny is left alive to bear witness that social roles don't need to be assumed blindly, that alternative lives are acceptable and that motherhood means caring for others, not only giving birth to children.

The ending is circular and self-explanatory; the novelist openly declares his intentions to reunite the three characters in just one persona and the subtext is made evident. Such an ending might seem unsatisfactory and frustrating to a literary critic, but it is one of the aspects that makes this novel such a great bibliotherapy recommendation. The reader doesn't have to wonder about the hidden clues that she might have missed and can simply enjoy this therapeutic reading.

Other reasons that recommend this book can be made more explicit by applying Gerrig's (1993) metaphor of the traveller. The psychologist cautions us many times that the prototype of the traveller that he had in mind when conceiving his theory was the unsophisticated reader, untrained in theories of subtext interpretation. His premise is very clear: "I go forward with the assumption that, within certain broad limits, all readers are capable of performing the cognitive activities that enable them to be transported to narrative worlds." (19) Therefore, the only prerequisite to the experience of being transported is the existence of the means of transportation, i.e. the book.

The reader-traveller distances herself from her world of origin, only to dive into the worlds of Schmitt's characters: Anne, Hanne and Anny. The chapters are short and the story of each character is fragmented by the stories of the other two characters, so that all the back-and-forth excursions – to the narrative world and back to the reader-traveller's world of origin – unfold with extreme speed, leading to a routinization of the cognitive travel channels. One by one, each travel deepens the route from fiction to reality and back, so that the perceived distance between the two worlds diminishes by means of normal travel wear and tear, by a normal process of cognitive desensitisation.

"The greater the departure from the real world – the more adjustments that must be made – the greater the perception of distance." (Gerrig 1993, 14) It is only fair to assume that more adjustments are needed for the immersion into Anne's sixteenth century world, and even into Hanne's world – and, therefore the perceived distance is greater – than for "visiting" the Hollywood star, but we have to keep in mind that the three characters are images of the same feminine persona, in terms of human ideals. If Anny's world is readily accessible, the other two characters' worlds will gain familiarity by similitude and will require fewer adjustments. This acquired flexibility of transportation leads to a character overlap and to assuming the characters' identity more easily.

Final remarks

The issue of the transfunctionality of literary fiction reflects not only on the extended purpose of reading – entertaining reading and therapeutic reading, i.e. *trans*-reading –, but also on the training and profession of the psychologist and comparatist. Could the

psychologist benefit by an education in the humanities, by an extension of her field of interest? If we are to take Freud's, Jung's and Yalom's advice, the answer is clear. But perhaps, this idea sounds a bit utopic in today's psychology, dominated by the scientist-practitioner model, that trains psychologists to be scientific researchers and only rely on empirical data, drawn from rigorous experiments conducted in controlled conditions.

In an article discussing the two major flaws of scientific psychology – its aspiration for scientific rigour and healing capacity, Mircea Miclea (1998) acknowledges that “psychologists have sacrificed relevance for accuracy” (261), i.e. that they failed to deliver answers to the real questions of humanity, and to provide solutions for improving the quality of human life, leaving this task to religion and mass-media, and pleads for a multidimensional opening of psychology, for what he calls the “polytropy” (266) of psychology, using a concept introduced by the Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu. In order to adjust to the modern man, psychology has to diversify its research subjects, its methods and its discourse and to incorporate multicultural trends. This does not mean giving up scientific methods of investigation, but developing new ones that will allow psychologists to investigate such subjects that have been neglected so far. Miclea also suggests making use of literary analogies and metaphors in psychological practice (268).

It is probably unreasonable to circumscribe bibliotherapy to one field or the other, be it psychology or comparative literature. From the psychologist's perspective, the questions of its scientific validity still remain unclarified, while the comparatist may find the choice of novels to be recommended too simplistic and some readers too inapt to fully appreciate her recommendation. This leaves us to taking only a first small step into this direction, so we need to advocate, once again, for academic inter-department cooperation between psychologists and comparatists. If bibliotherapy could answer James Clifford's question, “Where are you between?” (quoted in Bernheimer 1995, 12), we hope the answer would be “Between psychology and literature.”, because therapy is not just science, it is also art, as Yalom ascertains, while comparatism, we might add, is not all art, it also involves some science:

The “art” of psychotherapy has for me a dual meaning: “art” in that the execution of therapy requires the use of intuitive faculties not derivable from scientific principles and “art” in the

Keatsian sense, in that it establishes its own truth transcending objective analysis. (Yalom, *The Teaching* 1998, 338).

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