

Bibliotherapy and the Pharmacology of Fiction

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Abstract

In this contribution, I aim to interpret the famous scene in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book 8) in which the epic hero is confronted with a story of his own life at the court of the Phaeacians, as a primal scene of bibliotherapy. Building on earlier interpretations of the scene by Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero, I will discuss Odysseus's response to the stories that are sung to him in relation to concept of pharmacological thinking proposed by the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler. According to Stiegler, pharmacology is a way of thinking that considers the simultaneously positive and negative effects of a phenomenon. In our specific case, literature can be both a medicine and a poison for the mind.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; *The Odyssey*; fiction; narrative identity; pharmacology

Introduction: Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians

I would like to start by suggesting that we view a scene from the *Odyssey* as an 'Ur-scene' of bibliotherapeutic reading. This scene is central to Book 8 of Homer's epic, which, as you may recall, deals with the festivities held in honour of Odysseus at the court of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians. At the end of Book 5 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus lands on the shores of their island, Scheria, today's Corfu as some allege. In his beautiful book on Homer's epic, the Italian writer and critic Pietro Citati argues that if there is a place that can be rightly called the island of stories, this is it. In the course of Odysseus' stay, Citati writes, Scheria is filled with stories, songs and narrative, "as if life were nothing but words, real or imaginary" (Citati, 2004, 188).

Odysseus ends up on the shores of this island after Poseidon, the god of the sea, unleashes a huge storm that would surely have killed him were it not for the intervention of the other gods, particularly Athena. She not only saves Odysseus's life, but also directs to a large extent the events that occur during his stay with the people of the island, including his famous encounter with Alcinous's daughter Nausicaa, the main story of Book 6. Disguised as the king's herald, Athena draws a crowd to come to court and, as the text has it in the Loeb-edition that I used, "learn of the stranger who has newly come to the palace of wise Alcinous, driven astray over the sea" (Homer, 2004, 273). "[I]n form," she adds, "he is like the immortals" (Homer, 2004, 273). In preparation of the feast, she makes sure that the unknown stranger will be strong enough to be victorious in the games and sports activities that await him during the feast. As Homer writes, Athena "made him taller and sturdier to behold, that he might be welcomed by all the Phaeacians, and win awe and reverence, and might accomplish the many feats in which the Phaeacians made trial of Odysseus" (Homer, 2004, 273).

During the feast, there is a lot of drinking and eating (“twelve sheep, and eight white-tusked boars, and two oxen of shambling gait” (Homer, 2004, 277)), but more importantly for our purposes, there is also entertainment in the form of storytelling, in this case stories that are being narrated in song by Demodocus, “the good minstrel, whom the Muse loved above all other men” (Homer, 2004, 277). She “gave him both good and evil,” the narrator adds, “of his sight she deprived him, but gave him the gift of sweet song.” Alcinous himself awards the blind singer the epithet “divine,” adding to the praise that “to him above all others has the god granted skill in song, to give delight in whatever way his spirit prompts him to sing” (Homer, 2004, 275).

The story that Demodocus begins to tell (“the Muse moved the minstrel to sing of the glorious deeds of men” (Homer, 2004, 277) is the story of the very stranger in whose honour the feast is being held. Apart from Athena, nobody knows his name, let alone his identity. The story that the Phaeacians start to listen to, then, is the story of their guest, in which that guest is also one of the protagonists. It is *his* story, in other words, but it is clearly *not* his story to tell. Demodocus’s first intervention – there are three, in all – deals with the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles that supposedly determined the course of the Trojan War. The minstrel’s second song recalls the adulterous love affair between Ares and Aphrodite. Aphrodite is married to Hephaistos, who tricks the two lovers by shackling them in chains as they are making love in his marriage bed. (Several Gods serve as amused onlookers and witnesses to the adultery). In the third story, Demodocus recounts the myth of the Trojan horse, Odysseus’s most famous ruse that enabled the Greek army to decide the war in their favour. (In the epic, Homer labels Odysseus consistently as “polymetis,” the man of many resources. While he indeed proves to be smarter than most and finds solutions when others are at their wits’ end, the scene that we are looking at will make clear that even though he knows a lot of things, he surely doesn’t know himself all that well.)

The Tears of Odysseus: Arendt and Cavarero

Upon hearing two of these three stories – the first and the last one – Odysseus is caught crying by Alcinous, who very considerably puts a stop to Demodocus’s singing twice, first by inviting everybody to join in a series of planned sports activities and later by inviting his guest to finally make his identity known before he is about to embark on his way back to Ithaca. Demodocus’s second song has a different effect altogether. As the narrator says about that occasion: “Odysseus, was glad at heart as he listened and so too were the Phaeacians” (Homer, 2004, 299). The shared feeling is in stark opposition to the bitter tears that Demodocus’s other two stories provoke in Odysseus. Here is how the narrator describes the first instance, clearly suggesting that Odysseus may well be hiding his tears out a feeling of shame (“aidoos”).

This song the famous minstrel sang; but Odysseus grasped his great purple cloak with his stout hands, and drew it down over his head, and hid his handsome face; for he felt shame before the Phaeacians as he let fall tears from beneath his eyebrows. Indeed, as often as the divine minstrel ceased his singing, Odysseus would wipe away his tears and draw the cloak from off his head, and taking the two-handled cup would pour libations to the gods. But as often as he began again, and the Phaeacian nobles urged him to sing, because they took pleasure in his song, Odysseus would again cover his head and groan. Now from all the rest he concealed the tears that he shed, but Alcinous alone was aware of him and noticed, for he sat by him, and heard him groaning heavily. (Homer, 2004, 279)

The parallel with the effect that Demodocus's third story has on Odysseus is striking. The only difference between the two occasions is that in the latter case it is Odysseus himself who asks for the story to be told. "[S]ing of the story of the horse of wood", he urges the minstrel, "the horse which once Odysseus led up into the citadel as a thing of guile" (Homer, 2004, 307). Here is how the text describes Odysseus's response to the story of his request:

But the heart of Odysseus was melted and tears wet his cheeks beneath his eyelids. And as a woman wails and throws herself upon her dear husband, who has fallen in front of his city and his people, seeking to ward off from his city and his children the pitiless day; and as she beholds him dying and gasping for breath, she clings to him and shrieks aloud, while the foe behind her beat her back and shoulders with their spears, and lead her away to captivity to bear toil and woe, while with most pitiful grief her cheeks are wasted—so did Odysseus let fall pitiful tears from beneath his brows. Now from all the rest he concealed the tears that he shed, but Alcinous alone was aware of him and noticed, for he sat by him and heard him groaning heavily. (Homer, 2004, 309/311)

Why is Odysseus crying, and how are we to take his tears and the concomitant attempt at hiding them, the coincidence of "weeping and veiling" that Douglas Cairns (2009) writes about in an interesting contribution on these scenes to a scholarly volume on *Tears in the Graeco-Roman World*? The Homeric comparison in the last quotation goes some way to answering that question: the tears are the result of an experience of grief, of the awareness of having lost someone or something, and the stark realisation of what that loss entails and how it installs an absolute difference between what was then and what is now.

What the two tearful occasions – tearful for Odysseus, that is, and apparently only for him, as the text states clearly that the remainder of the audience enjoy the stories greatly – have in common is the fact that Odysseus recognizes himself as the subject of the story that the minstrel sings. It is not just that he realizes that the story is about him; in listening to the first account of his own adventures he suddenly becomes aware what he himself is all about and it is this awareness that prompts him to ask Demodocus to sing the second story that is as likely to provoke his tears.

In her unfinished 1971 book *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt writes the following: "Odysseus, listening, covers his face and weeps, though he has never wept before, and certainly not when what he is now hearing actually happened. Only when he hears the story does he become fully aware of its significance" (Arendt, 1978, 132). In other words, Demodocus's story conveys the meaning of events and actions that Odysseus witnessed at one point and acted out even, but which at the time he did not grasp in the way that he manages to do now. In her book Arendt discusses the scene in a section in which she reflects on the difference between "doing" and "thinking" – in the past, Odysseus did what he did, it is only when he hears the events recalled years later that he manages to think about them, and to see them differently.

Arendt also discusses Odysseus's crying scene in a book that was published a decade earlier, *Between Past and Future*, in the essay on "The Concept of History" that is that book's second chapter, more precisely. There, she famously labels Odysseus's tears "the tears of remembrance" (Arendt, 2006, 45). For Arendt, the scene, as she writes, "is paradigmatic for both history and poetry" (Arendt, 2006, 45) – what these two discursive genres have in common is the concept of story; historians and poets alike recall events that took place and that are worthwhile being remembered. They represent something of the past that is gone

forever were it not for the recovery that is warranted by its representation. In her brief discussion of the scene in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt, not entirely unsurprisingly, describes the effect as one of katharsis (Arendt, 2006, 45), a notion that is often invoked in discussions of bibliotherapy and related practices in which the healing effect of stories is at stake (one could include narrative medicine here).

What the tears of Odysseus make clear I take to be the following: he knows that he is listening to his own story (if only because the story is about him) but at the same time his tears can be taken as a sign of the feeling that this story (his story) is at odds with the person that he felt he was or that he used to be. There is a gap between the person that he was (at the time of the events which the stories recall) and the person that he now realizes he is. It is very likely that if he were in a position to tell his own story, the story we would then hear would be very different. This what the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero calls the “paradox of Odysseus” (in the second chapter of her book *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (1997, translated in English as *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*). “[B]efore hearing his story,” Cavarero writes, “[Odysseus] did not yet know who he was: the story of the rhapsod, the story told by an ‘other’, finally revealed his own identity” (Cavarero, 2000, 18). For Cavarero, as the English title of her book makes clear, our identity is relational: who we are, uniquely, is not just a matter of our idiosyncratic selves, but of the stories that others tell about us, of what Cavarero calls our “narratable selves.”

Bibliotherapy: Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Paul Ricoeur

I want to take the analogy that I have been suggesting all along between Odysseus’s crying scene and the theory and practice of bibliotherapy one step further. I should probably start by saying that bibliotherapy is a term used very broadly, in very different contexts and with quite different meanings. The form of bibliotherapy that I’m less interested, here, is the one that Leah Price in her book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* memorably labelled “mood-boosting” (Price, 2019, 120). With that term, Price refers to the practice where specific works of fiction are prescribed to readers in an attempt to make these readers feel better. The practice can be professionally supported, as in the mental health projects that Price also writes about, by the British NHS for instance – where fiction is prescribed, in Price’s words, “to alleviate anxiety and depression” (Price, 2019, 121). But it is also known in the more informal (and explicitly self-ironic) variety of a book like Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin’s *The Novel Cure* (published first in the UK in 2013 and translated in various languages, among which also Chinese). That book contains literary prescriptions for all sorts of ailments and problems, serious ones and less serious ones, aimed at what the authors in their introduction refer to as “the temporary relief of your symptoms due to the power of literature to distract and transport” (Berthoud & Elderkin, 2013, 2). This is clearly not the kind of bibliotherapeutic experience that Odysseus undergoes at the Phaeacian court. If he is transported at all, it is not to the sort of pleasant place that Berthoud and Elderkin seem to have in mind (transport is escape in their book) and he is definitely not distracted by the story that is offered to him. What *The Novel Cure* is after is laughter, not tears.

While I don’t want to disqualify this form of bibliotherapy (it has, after all, proven its success in specific circumstances), it is not the model that I am thinking about here. The variety of bibliotherapy that I have in mind is that described by the French philosopher and rabbi Marc-Alain Ouaknin in his 1994 book *Bibliothérapie. Lire c’est guérir* (the subtitle means: “reading

equals healing”). Key in Ouaknin’s version of bibliotherapy is the idea – inspired by the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Gadamer – that the understanding of the texts that one reads is ideally accompanied by a new understanding of one’s self, an understanding that the text provokes. Bibliotherapy, Ouaknin writes, in a definition that betrays the Proustian background of his ideas, is all about what he calls “the solitary encounter of a person with him- or herself through the intermediary of a book” (Ouaknin, 1994, 194). (“Reading,” as Proust famously wrote in his essay “Sur La Lecture” “is that fruitful miracle to communicate in the midst of loneliness.”)

“To refind oneself/ to recover oneself” is what Ouaknin sees as the primary goal of bibliotherapy (Ouaknin, 1994, 77). It’s a form of reading – active reading, creative reading – that comes close to what Paul Ricoeur in his work on interpretation calls “appropriation.” As Ricoeur puts it: “To understand oneself is to understand oneself in the presence of a text from which one derives the conditions of possibility for a different self from the one that came to the text in the first place.” (Ricoeur, 1986, 31, my translation) “This is what I take appropriation to be,” Ricoeur writes in his classic essay “What is a Text?”: “that the text realizes itself in the self-interpretation of a subject that in the end understands itself better, or differently, or even begins to understand itself.” (Ricoeur, 1986, 152, my translation)

This is, quite literally, what Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero see happening in the encounter between Odysseus and the stories that Demodocus sings about him during the feast that is being held in his honour. “[I]f Ulysses weeps,” Cavarero writes, “it is not because the story of the rhapsode faithfully reproduces that identity which the hero himself does not know and does not control. Rather, it is because the text that he is unexpectedly given clearly recognizes – or, better, reveals – his desire to him.” (Cavarero, 2000, 44) The story, in other words, enables Odysseus to arrive at a self-understanding that he would not have been able to achieve without it. (And that self-understanding, in turn, enables him in the subsequent Book 9 of the epic not only to disclose his identity to his host, but also to begin telling his own story, a story that he has only just come to grasp more properly.)

To be sure, my suggestion is not that bibliotherapeutic reading requires the sort of literal identification of a reader with the narrative’s protagonist that is at stake in the Odysseus-example, but some degree of identification, I believe, will always be a precondition for bibliotherapy to work, the feeling that we are addressed by the text, and that in response we recognize the text at least in part as being about ourselves, about a part of ourselves that we failed to see before the encounter with the story at hand. While reading we interpret the text as being related to who we are, we appropriate it in the sense that Ricoeur gives to that term, we make it our own, without however forcing our own preconceptions on it. Recently, Rita Felski has reminded us of the importance of readerly recognition, even though as she urges, we should be careful not to reduce recognition to the naive conviction that the text is a mere blueprint of our life as we understand it (of the sort that the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* believes when he is convinced that a poem that his neighbour wrote is quite literally about him: that is a form of narcissistic reading that goes against the grain of Ricoeur’s conception of what reading can achieve – Nabokov’s narrator has already made up his mind before he starts reading: he believes quite firmly that he knows who he is, and on the basis of that certain knowledge he has decided beforehand what the text is all about: it is about himself, nothing more, nothing less).

“Recognition is not repetition,” Felski writes, in a reminder that Nabokov’s narrator would do well to keep in mind, “it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known.

Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a different shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible. In a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority, something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am.” (Felski, 2008, 25) That something in bibliotherapy is the text that we read, in the scene where Odysseus starts to weep it is the story that Demodocus has on offer for him. Odysseus’s tears of remembrance are tears of recognition, in other words. “When we recognize something,” Felski writes, “we literally ‘know it again’ – but with a difference – Simultaneously reassuring and unnerving, [recognition] brings together likeness and difference in one fell swoop.” (Felski, 2008, 25)

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Felski’s phrase (“Simultaneously reassuring and unnerving”) serves as a good cue for the final step in my argument. Odysseus’s tears of recognition and remembrance fit the description better than the joyful “mood-boosting” variety of bibliotherapy that I have just contrasted with it. In a work like *The Novel Cure*, the idea that literature can have an unnerving or unsettling effect is seriously downplayed. I don’t have the time or space here to develop this further or give examples, but *The Novel Cure*’s idea of bibliotherapy appears to be by and large that reading is supposed to bring joy and happiness and that for that purpose books need to steer the reader away from the darker aspects of life. If they don’t, they need to make clear to readers that in the end they are much better off than the characters in the book. In the spirit of the medical metaphor, I would say that, on average, books in *The Novel Cure* function as pain killers – reading what is prescribed is meant to make life more comfortable, however temporarily, it’s the sort of dopamine shot that Anna Lembke writes about in her book *Dopamine Nation* when she describes her own addiction to reading romance novels (Lembke, 2021, 44).

The guiding idea behind this form of bibliotherapy is that of the healing power of stories – in some varieties of the reading practice this is taken as an almost intrinsic quality of stories. Many publications that I have read on bibliotherapy fail to take into account the fact that stories, while they do have the power to heal, can also be dangerous, unhealthy even. This is the central point of the book that the American critic Jonathan Gottschall published in 2021: *The Story Paradox. How Our Love of Storytelling Builds Societies and Tears them Down*. Gottschall’s book contains numerous examples of what the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in a famous TedX lecture of 2009 called “The Danger of a Single Story” (Adichie 2009). In her lecture, Adichie opposes the reduction of complex and many-faceted realities to “single” stories in which good and bad are not only clearly distinguishable but also simply pitted against each other. In single stories, nuances and crucial differences are erased in favour of stereotypes, clichés and homogenizations, all characteristics that go against our ideal of what good literature is supposed to be and do. Adichie herself, as a writer of novels, is clearly committed to that ideal: her work focuses on the fundamental complexity and heterogeneity of human experience; it is her conviction that stories are by definition “plural,” if only in the sense that what they tell might as well be told differently, from a different narrative perspective, with other character constellations, in a different temporal scheme, and so on.

Within the framework of narrative medicine, and of many practices of bibliotherapy, narratives are generally (and quite logically) seen as wholesome, healthy, good for you – well,

good for everybody actually. Pharmacology as a concept is meant to complicate that basic idea and go beyond it. I borrow the concept from the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler who in his 2010 book *Ce qui fait que la vie vaut la peine d'être vécue* (2010) develops the concept as the cornerstone of a way of thinking that tries to take into account and come to terms with the fact that things (concepts, phenomena) can yield opposite effects simultaneously, that they can be medicine and poison at the same time.

The background of the concept is Plato's famous analysis of writing in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates reminds his audience that in Greek the word "farmakon" both means medicine and poison (for Plato, in this passage, writing is poison) – in the context of bibliotherapy, an example that immediately comes to mind is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Not only because it is a novel that shows that for some readers (like the novel's heroine) the books we read can be sheer poison to the mind, but because in the court case that followed the initial publication of Flaubert's text in a French newspaper the two perspectives – fiction as poison, fiction as medicine – were shown to be simultaneously at play in the novel: on the one hand, there was the argument of the prosecutor who was convinced that *Madame Bovary* would definitely poison the minds of young female readers; on the other hand there was the argument of the defence that asserted (against the author's will, ironically) that the novel's purpose was medicinal in a way, in the sense that it urged readers not to follow the example of the heroine and to read more properly and, above all, to read better books. (Flaubert's novel was counterpoison to the sort of books that his heroine loved so much, this is also the suggestion behind the famous caricature that shows Flaubert in the process of dissecting the heroine of his novel, like a doctor trying to find out what is her problem.) The point that I'm trying to make is not so much that *Madame Bovary* allows for those two opposed readings (we already knew that), but that this very possibility might as well be at the heart of what we take literature to be. The example of the story that Odysseus listens to leads to a similar conclusion: in Odysseus, it provokes tears, in the remainder of the audience it leads to pleasure – the story itself generates the two opposed effects.

In what I have called (prompted by Leah Price) the mood-boosting variety of bibliotherapy the therapeutic, medicinal potential of literary writings is often too much taken for granted: texts appear to be intrinsically good, which cannot but lead to the conclusion that if the approach fails to work it is either because the reader is at fault, he or she is reading the wrong way, or the books are: he or she is reading the wrong book. One of the more interesting contributions to our thinking about bibliotherapy, to my mind, is the work of the French novelist and literary scholar Philippe Forest. In a series of brutally honest novels and essays, Forest wrote about the loss of his four-year-old daughter Pauline to a fatal tumour that was detected briefly after her third birthday. The story is not limited to one text, it develops over a series of works, simply because the author cannot bring himself to ending the story. His telling of the story, Forest writes in an essay that is significantly entitled "On literature and its so-called therapeutic values," is not supposed to be therapeutical. This is the conclusion at which he arrives in the essay: "I keep thinking that true literature simply has no reparative value when it comes to the disaster of living." (Forest, 2007, 161–162, my translation)

Forest's conclusion brings me back to what Hannah Arendt wrote about Odysseus's "tears of remembrance" and the cathartic value of those tears: katharsis, Arendt writes in the paragraph in which she mentions the concept, equals "reconciliation with reality" – tragic works of art do not cure us from the tragedies that life has in store, they help us in trying to live with those tragedies, to be reconciled to their reality, to their being real.

If literary texts had a single therapeutic function, Forest writes, he would only have needed to write one novel to cure him from the pain that the loss of his daughter entailed. “I don’t know whether my novels cured me from the pain of having lost my little girl. I don’t think so. If so, one book would have sufficed.” (Forest, 2007, 161, my translation) One book clearly was not enough, which is why he keeps writing, to come to terms with the changing reality of his grief. If, on the other hand, the writing had no therapeutical value at all, he would have been crazy not to let go of the story.

For Forest, of course, it is important to tell the right kind of story. The story has to be more than a mere balm, more than a sugary attempt at comfort that tries to hide the pain and bitterness that are an intrinsic part of life. The stories that to him are worth telling are those that do not frantically try to hide that life now and then is bound to have something disastrous in store. It goes without saying, Forest concludes in his essay, that our stories need to keep emphasizing both sides of the medal: this is what happens in bibliotherapy as well, if all goes well: the fictions that we read enable us to take for a fact the inherently tragic nature of life – but also the inherently comic nature of life. This is what I take the message of Bernard Stiegler’s pharmacology to be: we need to keep in mind both sides of that medal. That, in the end, is the sort of life that, to recall the title of Stiegler’s book, is worth being lived – and, we might add, books that can carry over that insight are books that are worth being read. Let me finish with a final quote, from Josh Cohen, this time: “[G]reat fiction (...) sets a mirror before us, in which we see not only the self we know, but the self we don’t. We discover regions of ourselves we were barely aware of, to sometimes exhilarating and sometimes distressing effect.” (Cohen, 2021, xv) The stories that Odysseus in Book 8 of the *Odyssey* undergoes do just that: the second one fills him with joy (it’s “exhilarating” to borrow Cohen’s term), whereas the first and third ones seem to have a more distressing effect: the reader (listener) ends in tears. But in the end, as we should not forget, those tears enable Odysseus to come to terms with his own past and to begin telling the story, his own story, in Book 9 of the *Odyssey*. Alcinous has asked him the question several times: who is this stranger? After having shed the tears of remembrance, Odysseus can finally answer the question: he *is* the stranger and the story – warts and all, as the British so subtly say – is finally his to tell.

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