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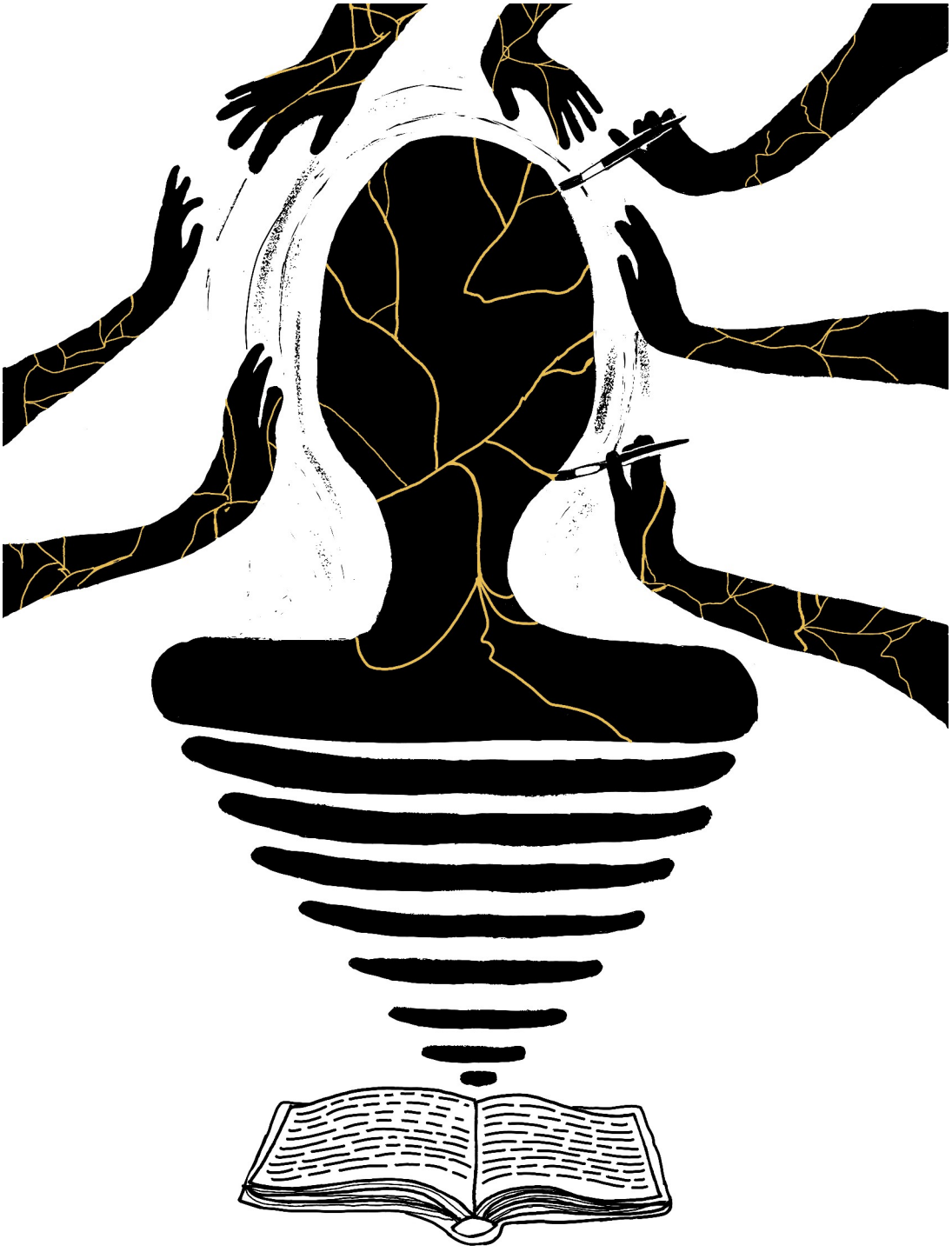

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Editor's Introduction

> *... we do not feel at home/ in our interpretations of the world*
> (Rainer Maria Rilke: Duino Elegies, 1st elegie, trans. Martyn Crucefix)

Life is a constant search for belonging and meaning. Biblio/poetry therapy offers safe places for supportive, helping relationships and communities, encounters and self-reflections where people have the opportunity to tackle their own subject matters. In recent years, during the most hopeless times of the pandemic and war – as Rilke says in his 1st Duino Elegie – people felt insecure and didn't know where to turn for help in searching for belonging and meaning. Because of these collective crises, people have become more focused on big existential issues that make people aware of their own existence and encourage them to clarify their relationship to fundamental questions and values leading to personal change and a more authentic life.

In recent times, crises and challenges facing our world and our daily lives have made various forms of therapeutic and mental health support methods more popular, including art therapies. Specifically, biblio/poetry therapy is more in demand than ever.

In Europe, the first association for biblio/poetry therapy was founded in 1981 in Finland. Since then, an organisational, training and service framework for biblio/poetry therapy has been and is being developed in many other countries. Some Hungarian, Finnish, British, Italian, Lithuanian, Croatian and Slovakian colleagues have been in contact for years. They have joint projects, training courses, and some of them meet at various professional events online and offline. But never before have they come together on a larger scale to meet face-to-face and learn more about the work of colleagues from other countries, to exchange experiences and to join forces in the hope of developing future joint projects, research and training standards.

In 2023, we decided to organise our first European conference in Budapest in early October 2024, titled 'Encounters, Paths and Challenges in Troubled Times', with the main objective of bringing together participants and exchanging ideas to start building a strong European network focusing on biblio/poetry therapy. The end result exceeded our expectations, with 136 participants from 27 countries, not only from Europe, sharing their theoretical ideas and practical methods of using biblio/poetry therapy. We are launching this journal with the intention of publishing the rich theoretical and practical results and methods gained from the joint effort of our new network, so that the field can develop and we can learn from each other's professional work and experiences.

It has been my great pleasure and honor to serve as the host for the first conference held in Budapest, and I am also grateful for the opportunity to serve as the first editor-in-chief of the European Journal for Biblio/Poetry Therapy.

The *European Journal for Biblio/Poetry Therapy,* sponsored and edited by our cooperating associations and practitioners engaged in biblio/poetry therapy, will be an online, open access, international and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal. The journal welcomes original contributions that present new knowledge about the role of language arts and biblio/poetry therapy in education, healthcare, and community building settings. Papers are welcomed from researchers and practitioners working with language arts and metaphors in the fields of biblio/poetry therapy such as classical bibliotherapy, therapeutic writing modalities, and narrative approaches. Papers from researchers and practitioners who combine biblio/poetry therapy with other expressive arts techniques and modalities are also welcomed. We intend to publish theoretical, empirical and

experimental research that aims to make a contribution to our understanding of the theory and practice of poetry therapy and bibliotherapy.

In the first issue of the first volume, we publish edited and reviewed versions of the theoretical presentations and practical workshops of the Budapest conference. The keynote speech by Juhani Ihanus (Finland) will be followed by theoretical papers by Mariana Casale (United Kingdom), Thor Magnus Tangerås (Norway), Igor Žunkovič (Slovenia), and then by insights into practical applications as approached by Emica Calogjera Rogić (Croatia), Anne Taylor (United Kingdom), Petra Partanen (Finland), and Renata Martinec (Croatia). In addition to the excellent work of the authors, special thanks go to the volunteer anonymous reviewers who put a lot of time and effort into making this issue a professional quality publication. The cover image of the first issue is an art work created by Anita Lencsés (Hungary) who was a member of my 100-hour person-centred biblio/poetry therapy group in 2021. She expresses through the spirit of kintsugi what the method of biblio/poetry therapy and a supportive community gives to people. This drawing is an important symbolic representation for all of us. Although the approach can be diverse, the fact that the method of biblio/poetry therapy offers order, structure, and emotional support always remains common.

Wishing you a rewarding, inspirational and flourishing reading experience,

Judit Béres

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From trauma to *thauma*
Biblio/poetry therapy as a source of wonder, empathy, and resilience

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Abstract

This article highlights some of the historical roots and developments of biblio/poetry therapy. It presents a brief conceptual history of trauma, *thauma*, and empathy in relation to the therapeutic use of words. The possibilities of biblio/poetry therapy in the empathic-dialogic processing of personal experiences and interpretations of the human situation are assessed. The goals of biblio/poetry therapy are seen as promoting transformative leaps, peaceful storytelling, coping, and resilience through the interactive exchange of creative, exploratory, and emotionally touching words. The future(s) of biblio/poetry therapy, including in community and cultural contexts, are also considered.

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy; coping; empathy; resilience; *thauma*; transformation; trauma

Introduction

Philosophy and poetry both embody what the ancient Greeks called *thauma* – a sense of wonder, amazement, and awe. In biblio/poetry therapy, participants explore and contemplate this sense of wonder through the language arts. Central to the process is engaging and surprising oneself, marveling at the unfamiliar, and often transcending lingering traumatic effects by adopting a growth-oriented perspective that can lead to a heightened state of awareness filled with wonder and awe. While biblio/poetry therapy does not promise miraculous cures, it does enrich the personal and social realms through touching expression, narrative exploration, and shared discussion.

The impact of literature on the human mind and mentalization is multifaceted, affecting various levels including neurobiology, bodily functions, emotions, cognition, and socio-cultural issues. Each word has the potential to inspire further writing, reading, speaking, and expression, connecting and resonating with meaningful moments, memories, and the future. Even conflicting narrative voices offer opportunities for shared interpretation and negotiation of our inner and outer worlds.

Stories, like reveries, dreams, and poetic musings, create a playful mental space, an experimental and experiential ground where we explore our coping skills, resources, challenges, losses, hopes, fears, and aspirations. By acknowledging the positive power of our words and reevaluating unproductive strategies with resilience, we can infuse our daily lives with poetic appreciation.

This is not a call to romanticize the past, but rather an invitation to creative dialogues that open up cultural participation and connect the expressive arts to health and well-being. Through reflective, transformative, and developmental biblio/poetry therapy, individuals and groups are given the

freedom to articulate the unspeakable, confront silenced traumas, and embrace the wonders embedded in imaginative exchanges and empathic interactions.

Trauma

The ancient Greek word *trauma* (*τραῦμα*) ("wound") referred primarily to physical injuries, caused by accidents, tragic, violent, or destructive events or atrocities such as wars. Homer's epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* also deal primarily with physical wounds. Hippocratic medicine was somatic; only philosophers, poets, and rare medical practitioners discussed the healing power of words. Only later, with the development of psychiatry and psychology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, did the term come to mean psychological injury.

Trauma has become a diagnostic category in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was introduced as an official psychiatric category in 1980. Since then, trauma has become a widely and loosely used term that encompasses individual, socio-cultural, and even global traumas associated with catastrophes, disasters, wars, and environmental anxieties. Contemporary discussions of trauma range from issues of the past to everyday problems and anticipations of the future.

Today, trauma studies are included in psychological, psychiatric and psychotherapeutic studies, memory studies, historical, socio-cultural, philosophical, ethical and literary studies.

Constatine Cavafy's poem "Melancholy of Jason Kleander, poet in Kommagini, A.D. 595" (1921) expresses the ancient faith in poetic words that heal, at least for a while:

> "I turn to you, Art of Poetry,
> because you know about drugs:
> attempts to numb the pain, through Imagination [*φᾰντᾰσῐ́ᾱ*, phantasíā)] and Word.
> […]
> Bring your drugs, Art of Poetry –
> they numb the wound at least for a little while."

Word therapy in classical antiquity was based on philosophical and rhetorical concepts. The persuasive power of language in the human mind was discussed in classical antiquity by reflecting on the use of *logos* in rhetoric and therapeutics. The effects of the "beautiful word" (*logos kalos*) on the character (*ethos*) of the hearer, the state of illness (*diathesis*), and the appropriate moment (*kairos*) were seen as crucial in creating harmony (*sophrosyne*) in the human soul (*psykhe*).

For example, reading, music, travel, exercise, and massage were associated with medicine in the first-century medical treatise *De medicina* (On medicine) by the Roman encyclopedist Aulus Cornelius Celsus, who suggested that reading and discussing the sayings of orators would stimulate the critical judgment of patients.

Bibliotherapy and poetry therapy to heal the wounds

Samuel McChord Crothers (1857–1927), an American Unitarian minister, is credited with coining the term "bibliotherapy" (Greek *biblos*: a book or a scroll; or *biblion*: a small book, or a scroll; and *therapeia*: care, healing or service) during World War I to describe the rehabilitative, educational, recreational, and entertaining effects of reading. As early as 1899 and 1900, he had adopted the metaphor of the "gentle reader" to imply an emotionally positive attitude toward reading (Crothers, 1899; 1900).

In his 1914 speech to American librarians, he emphasized the therapeutic value of books and used the word "bibliotherapy" for the first time: "The librarian's science might be termed *bibliotherapy* [italics added]. He should treat people who come to the library as patients who come with various kinds of maladies […]." (Keystone State Library Association, October 1914, 108; see also Ihanus, 2019, 81.)

Samuel McChord Crothers continued his speech: "People need various kinds of books, not only those which stimulate but the sedative books that bring a certain harmony with life, and what is one man's stimulant is another man's sedative." (Ibid., 108.)

In his 1916 article, Crothers has the fictional Dr. Bagster of the "Bibliopathic Institute" speak of "bibliotherapy" as a "new science" (Crothers, 1916, 295). Dr. Bagster proclaims: "I don't care whether a book is ancient or modern, whether it is English or German, whether it is in prose or verse, whether it is a history or a collection of essays, whether it is romantic or realistic. I only ask, 'What is its therapeutic value'?" (Crothers, 1916, 292.)

Among the poets was Walt Whitman, who, as a volunteer in Washington's war hospitals in 1863, had read the Bible and whatever they wanted to wounded soldiers during the American Civil War. He also wrote letters for them, and to relieve his own stress, Whitman wrote dozens of newspaper articles, poems, essays, and books as a result of his work as a volunteer in the hospitals. (Killingsworth 2007, 9–10.)

In 1928, Eli Greifer, a bohemian poet who was also a lawyer and pharmacist, began a campaign to show that the didactic message of poetry had healing power. He founded the Remedy Rhyme Gallery in New York's Greenwich Village. He believed in a healing process that consisted of memorizing therapeutic poems by such luminaries as Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake.

His poetic pharmacy was more shamanistic than pharmaceutical: "a psychograft-by-memorization in the inmost reaches of the brain" was to unite "the soul-staff" of great poets of all ages and "the spirit of the patient" and let the poems "gently enter and transfuse the ailing subconscious, the abraded and suffering personality" (Greifer, 1963, 2).

In the 1950s, Greifer pioneered group "poem therapy" and introduced it to hospitals, first at Creedmore State Hospital and, in 1959, at the Mental Hygiene Clinic of Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, with psychiatrists Jack J. Leedy and Sam Spector as his supervisors.

Poiesis **and the fields of biblio/poetry therapy**

Poiesis means to do something (ancient Greek *poiein*), to give existence to something that did not exist before. Poiesis evokes an internally relevant and meaningful world. Poiesis includes various creative activities (handicrafts, verbal, musical and artistic works, etc.).

Poiesis enhances the personal experience of available resources, even in virtual anxiety. It enriches life values and serves mutual social relations. Positive poetic meanings can infuse ordinary life events. New priorities and goals can be set, and even in difficult situations, positive perspectives and benefits can be found by reflecting and remembering through "Imagination and Word".

Today biblio/poetry therapy and its poiesis have expanded into several fields and applications:

- Clinical
- Developmental (personal and professional)
- Educational / Psychoeducational
- Collaboration with other expressive arts therapies
- New virtual interactive methods
- Individual / Group / Community / Culture

All of these areas contribute to therapeutic, expressive, and creative interaction that promotes self-reflective exploration and community-building initiatives, as well as constructive collaboration with other expressive arts therapies.

Thauma

Thauma (*θαῦμα*, awe, amazement, wonder, puppet) is inherent in the language of literature, through which people reflect on their own sense of wonder—a process of being surprised, curious about something greater than the ordinary, or rather, of seeing the ordinary from an amazing perspective, in a heightened and excited state of consciousness.

Such awe has close relatives in amazement, astonishment, and astoundment. Plato's Socrates (in *Theaetetus*, 155d) and Aristotle (in *Metaphysics*, 982b) already saw wonder (*thauma, thaumazein*) as the beginning of philosophy, because it suddenly opens our eyes and perplexes us, making us dizzy with puzzlement. In the ancient Greek world, thauma resonated with the visual arts, architecture, music, and poetry.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1961, Book I, Lesson 3, Commentary 55) continued the same tradition by commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "Now the reason why the philosopher is compared to the poet is that both are concerned with wonders. For the fables with which the poets deal are composed of wonders, and the philosophers themselves were moved to philosophize as a result of wonder."

***Thauma*, narrative and biblio/poetry therapy**

Effective stories that are surprising and strangely familiar capture our attention and involve us emotionally. Such stories facilitate "transportation" and immersion in the narrative flow.

"Thaumatic" reading and writing juxtaposes and explores texts from previously disparate literary genres and periods, creating "unexpected connections, startling discontinuities and radical new perspectives" (Lightfoot, 2017, 11).

In biblio/poetry therapy, language allows participants to be surprised by *mirabilia* (wonderful things) and moved to share respectful awe. This in turn can heal wounds (and traumas) through retelling and shifting meanings and perspectives, resulting in an expanded sense of human resources.

Wandering and wondering discussions/discourses (Latin *discursus* means "running about") and overlapping expressions circulate in interactive and dialogical biblio/poetry therapy.

Each word can be an invitation to rewrite, reread, speak and discourse the moment, the memory, and the future from a new point of view. Literary texts always have different and conflicting, yet shareable and negotiable interpretations of the minds and worlds in and around us.

***Thauma*, neuroscience and philosophy**

Current cutting-edge neuroscience agrees that our brains are wired to and for wonder.

When we explore and are curious about a new, uncertain but exciting challenge, the striatum in the brain is activated and releases much more dopamine than it does in a boring situation. It releases even more dopamine when the challenge is personally meaningful; and when our excited emotions are aroused, a surge of neurotransmitters called opiates are released. The hippocampal circuitry is activated, bringing up memory details and contexts to enrich exciting moments and providing future scenarios to recalibrate our identities.

Inspiring and compelling stories have also been shown to release the neurochemical oxytocin, which positively affects human empathy and trust (Zak, 2015). (For an exploration of subjective experience through neurophenomenological studies of awe and wonder, see Gallagher et al., 2015.)

Like philosophy, biblio/poetry therapy most likely began out of a sense of awe, out of thauma, not out of trauma it sought to heal. Plato uses the word *thaumatopoios* in his Allegory of the Cave, combining *thauma* with *poiein* ("to make, create, compose," the root of "poet")—literally, "a maker of miracles."

In other ancient Greek texts, *thaumatopoios* refers to such popular performers as jugglers, acrobats, and puppeteers. Thus, in this etymology, there is a "discursive slippage from the magician to the trickster, from veritable wonder to entertainment and legerdemain" that brings "a distinct sense of the socially marginal, a smell of the street and the marketplace" (Shershow, 1995, 17).

Communal and cultural biblio/poetry therapy

Such senses and smells are not alien to the ongoing participatory biblio/poetry therapy processes and performances alongside street artists. The performative and transformative dimensions of language arts and other expressive arts underscore the use of participatory arts practices in the building of both community and well-being.

For example, poetry therapy groups can work from socio-cultural, non-medicalizing points of departure, promoting collective poetry, rap, street art, improvisational works, and works created on socially mediated multi- and cross-arts platforms.

Participatory arts projects and initiatives that build social and cultural capital and improve well-being are often based on a non-pathologizing approach. Socially engaging and empowering activities can help individuals and communities develop their resources and multicultural forms of health and well-being.

Rather than adhering to a static model of thought and action, or to a dogma or idea, biblio/poetry therapy continually examines and develops its theoretical background, methods, and practices. Through this openness to change and in response to the call of communities and cultures, biblio/poetry therapy welcomes creative encounters and further projects for sustainable development (e.g. eco-poetry).

Reading, writing, and performance in biblio/poetry therapy are closely related to subjective cognitive-emotional and intersubjective socio-cultural dimensions of human expressive capacities that support and promote individual and community resilience in the face of difficult challenges.

Empathy

The English word *empathy* is derived from the ancient Greek ἐμπάθεια (*empatheia*, meaning "physical affection or passion"). Schopenhauer, Herder, and Lotze had used *Einfühlung* in philosophy, but in the 1870s Friedrich Theodor and Robert Vischer adapted the term to create the German term *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") for aesthetic research (emotionalist aesthetics).

In the early 20th century, the German philosopher Theodor Lipps (2018) defined *Einfühlung* as the projection of inner bodily feelings of striving and movement into objects, the key to all forms of aesthetic experience and aesthetic resonance. Other suggested English translations included "aesthetic sympathy", "play", "semblance", and "animation."

After the Second World War, the concept became popular—no longer as a projection into objects but as immersion into the experience of another (see Lanzoni, 2018).

Critical questions can be asked: Is there a "cult" of empathy in today's media and therapy markets? Does it promote an indifferent routine, an "empty empathy" (cf. Kaplan, 2005)? Or is it possible to develop an "aesthetics of care" (Saito, 2022) as an ethical everyday practice based on genuine reciprocal caring relationships rather than pseudo-care?

Empathy as a concept has three main dimensions. First, *affective empathy*, also called *emotional empathy*, is the ability to respond to another's mental state with an appropriate emotion, to resonate

with it. Second, *cognitive empathy* has been described as the ability to understand the perspective or mental state of another person. Third, *somatic empathy* is a physical resonant response, probably based on the mirror neurons, in the somatic nervous system.

The terms *social cognition*, *perspective taking*, *Theory of Mind (ToM)*, and *mentalizing* are often used synonymously, but it is unclear whether they are equivalent due to a lack of studies comparing ToM with different types of empathy.

Affective and cognitive empathy are also independent of each other; someone who empathizes strongly emotionally is not necessarily good at understanding another person's perspective.

Cognitive empathy can be further divided into the following scales: 1) *Perspective taking*: the tendency to spontaneously assume the psychological perspective of others. 2) *Fantasy (simulation/reverie)*: the tendency to (partially) identify with fictional characters. 3) *Tactical (or "strategic") empathy*: the deliberate use of perspective taking (often combined with perspective switching) to achieve certain desired ends.

Emotions and literature

Emotions can arise from encountering a work of art (including literary fiction) as if from the outside. Such emotions are *aesthetic emotions*.

When entering the narrative world of a story, the reader is evoked by *narrative emotions.* Mar et al. (2011) have described five narrative emotions that are in complex interaction with each other:

1) *Emotions of sympathy*: You feel sympathy for the fictional characters, but you are more like a witness to their plight, not closely related to them.

2) *Emotions of identification*: Imaginative identification with a fictional character and resulting emotions.

3) *Emotions of empathy*: Not identifying with a fictional character but understanding a character's goals through our imaginative mental model of his or her mind and feeling something similar to what the character feels.

4) *Relived emotions*: Emotions associated with personal memories that are modified and reevaluated through fictional characters and events.

5) *Remembered emotions*: Emotions derived through fiction from evolutionary and cultural kinship with the rest of humanity, not limited to memories of personally experienced events.

I have proposed that "meta-emotions" are also evoked by reading fiction and sharing experiences. Thus, meta-reflection includes metacognition (I know what and how I know) and meta-emotion. Meta-emotion evoked by fiction or by artwork can be summarized as: I judge now how I felt then, how I might have felt centuries and generations ago, how I will feel in the future. (Ihanus, 2007.)

Readers (and viewers) realize and complete a literary (or any other) work of art through their moods, emotions, and psychological/neural processes: subjectivation occurs through virtual simulation, mentalization, and various conscious-unconscious shifts.

Literature can evoke a variety of emotions, not just empathy. The central affects that have been associated with fictional narrative are often curiosity, surprise, and suspense. Readers' emotional experiences of empathy and other emotions have mostly been explored through psychological empirical studies combined with rhetorical theories of narrative. Biblio/poetry therapy research and practice can add to this field insights from real-life situations and interactions among readers of diverse backgrounds and heterogeneous intersectional identities.

As Claudia Breger (2017, 227) summarizes, "the rhetorical processes of narration and reading engage affects, bodily memories, and associations in layered transactions between characters, narrators, implied and actual readers and authors".

The process of biblio/poetry therapy can bridge knowledge and emotion, forge connections between previously separated fields, and lay the groundwork for further co-creative efforts.

Exaggerated expectations that therapeutic reading and writing will automatically lead to empathy, altruistic behavior, and a just culture are too simplistic, whereas multiple creative processes embrace complexity and even chaotic states.

Creative, playful and poetic-empathic approach in biblio/poetry therapy

Creative acts of reading and writing seek and explore the dynamic balance between chaos and order, achieving self-reflection and self-organization. The various ramifications of biblio/poetry therapy are open to experience, which means that they are open to new perceptions and expressions and resist premature closure.

Intuitive abilities and shared meaning-making are activated in biblio/poetry therapy, helping to cope with anxiety and ambiguity. An essential component of biblio/poetry therapy is the courage to wait and listen in the state of unknowing, and to anticipate futures (transformative "leaps").

Poetic playfulness can disrupt given categories. The "precariousness" of play lies "between" inner and outer realities. Poetic players can take risks and even make "nonsense". Poetic-empathic play involves taking on different identities and roles, constructing different selves in changing interactive situations and relationships.

In biblio/poetry therapy, play involves the "freedom" to let go and let be in search of the feeling and meaning of my position: I am, I am alive, I am myself, I am writing and transforming myself, actually my various selves. I am not just a permanent, repetitive story, but a constantly evolving constellation of stories. I will stand by my words, and even between the lines, my meanings are never complete; they materialize and change through dynamic dialogues between the self and others as well as between the reader/writer and the text in its various contexts.

The future(s) of biblio/poetry therapy

When well-being is not forced to bend to the terms of governments, conglomerates and business algorithms, there will be open and free spaces on various stages for emotionally moving ecstatic-poetic performances—and within participatory and interactive media frameworks.

The future of biblio/poetry therapy is certainly not predictable, its idioms and expressions are full of surprise and awe, evolving into insights in an inexhaustible flow of language and mind. Biblio/poetry therapy is constantly in the making, in the workshop of *poiesis*. Metaphorical acts incite us to *poiesis*, which has its goals—to make visible the aspects of the inner meaningful invisible worlds and to work together in the here and now.

Although you cannot change what has happened, you can change what it means to you and how you deal with it. This old wisdom must be restored by re-narrativizing it over and over again. Trauma and traumatization (even vicarious) can be retold. The silence surrounding traumatic experiences and the act of witnessing them can be broken by exposing one symptomatic silence after another.

One must not be silent about what was once silenced.

As the poet Paul Celan (1960/1986, 50) wrote: "The attention which the poem pays to all that it encounters, its more acute sense of detail, outline, structure, colour, but also of the 'tremors and hints'—all this is not, I think, achieved by an eye competing (or concurring) with ever more precise instruments, but, rather, by a kind of concentration mindful of all our dates."

Stories for love & peace

Genuine fiction (*les belles lettres*), with "beautiful" and "sweetened" words (*logos kalos* and *logos hedysmenos*), and even with spicy and rough language, different rhythms and melodies, promotes the exchange and flow of words. Such words contribute to the resolution of traumas and conflicts that are accompanied by grief over loss, shame over humiliation, anger and rage over violence, fear of enemies, and bitter memories of prejudice and injustice.

Storytelling as conflict transformation (not just conflict resolution or management) and as peacebuilding does not resolve our differences, but it can create visions that are richer and larger than our differences. Love stories and peacemaking—peaceful meaning-making—go together. There is ample poetic space for transformative paradoxes in peacemaking, as described by John Paul Lederach (1995). They combine such seemingly irreconcilable ideas or opposites as systemic and personal transformation, justice and mercy, individual independence and individual interdependence, commitment to process and commitment to outcome.

Co-creation and shared storytelling can bridge divides and bring emerging content, qualities, ideas, and emotions into fruitful coexistence, whether in our immediate neighborhoods or in dialogues between cultures and civilizations. By opening our ideational shutters and removing writer's blocks, we see new word views and fresh world views. We can all become "professional" peaceful storytellers.

Storytelling is the central means by which we maintain, transfer and modify our individual and social existence, experience, learning, knowledge and memory. Stories can provide us with the "vocabulary that enables people to cope with inadequacy, to manage failure and to gain a sense of self-esteem" (Plummer, 1995, 173).

Stories are virtual spaces, playgrounds, and workplaces for testing our various dimensions in moving worlds. The free play of words in biblio/poetry therapy is neither antagonistic nor agonistic,

not between competing winners and losers, but involves the mutual enjoyment of surplus meanings between participants. Stories, like reveries and dreams, are testing grounds on which we explore our strategies, potentials, alternatives, challenges, dangers, hopes and fears, gains and losses, likes and dislikes. Stories are vehicles for carrying reveries, fantasies and dreams into open dia- and polylogic developments, thus expanding one's mutual imaginative space and perspectives of action.

In biblio/poetry therapy, a meaningful approach is not the outward recording and evaluation of behavior, but the creative reading and writing of polyphonic relationship narratives across the lifespan. Through autobiographical narratives, we interpret and reevaluate the history, present, and future of our attachment relationships. Through reflective and dialogic reading and writing, touching memories, emotions, associations, and metaphors can dramatize personal attachments and link them to the construction of narrative identities.

In biblio/poetry therapy, participants meet and share narratives about their preferences and affections. In this way, the poetics of the states of mind can unfold: "a stronger voice and the blue incense of the heart / and words" (Seghers 1945, 72). Nor are attachment narratives ever complete, but temporary and open to a process of retelling and reevaluation, to a surprising word-attraction (cf. the "butterfly effect" when the movement of a butterfly's wings has an effect on the universe).

Coping and biblio/poetry therapy

Research on coping has focused primarily on problem solving and emotional regulation in the past and present stressful situations (harms/losses, challenges, threats) but *meaning-focused* and *future-oriented* coping strategies and the role of positive emotions and appraisals in the stress process have recently received more attention (e.g., Folkman, 2008; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Personal meanings and positive emotions also support problem-solving and emotional equilibrium while enhancing one's personal experience of available resources, enriching life values, and serving reciprocal social relationships.

Moreover, the means to anticipate the challenges and adversities facing humanity are not only individual-centered but require large group negotiation of life-sustaining efforts, mutual reconciliation of conflicts, and constructive planning for future generations (Ihanus, 2011, 56).

Through trauma-informed biblio/poetry therapy methods, post-traumatic growth can follow even from extremely traumatic situations and the sense of coherence can induce a sense of relational compassion and poetic-empathic relationships.

The process of reflective and transformative reading/writing

Different levels can be identified in the process of reflective and transformative reading/writing. I have proposed a theoretical model of the process of (facilitated) reflective and transformative reading/writing as a possible theoretical guide for biblio/poetry therapy practice (Table 1; Ihanus, 2019, 102).

Reading/writing → Selective attention → Emotional conditions → Motivational conditions → Defenses and coping strategies → Working memory and emotional autobiographical memory → Activation of personal themes and metaphors → Feedback → Identification, exploration, comparison, recognition, transference → Creative imagination and language play → Further personal reflection and expressive communication → Dialogic negotiation of meaning → Understanding and insight → Internalizing, relativizing and integrating the past, present, self, others and environment → Metareflection = metacognition and meta-emotion → Rereading and rewriting → Holding and transforming identity stories and life stories for the future

Table 1. The process of reflective and transformative reading/writing

The arrows do not represent a linear causal chain, but rather "epigenetically" interlocking developmental steps, the order of which may change over time. These steps can be studied as different sequences, and at times some steps may be less important, implicit, or dormant in the ongoing process. Not all steps are functional for all participants. The richness and vitality of the reading/writing experience is reflected in the amount of playful rereading and rewriting. Rereading and rewriting lead to holding and transforming identity stories and life stories into the future.

Personal, self-reflexive, and insightful reading and writing is a complex and dynamic process that requires acceptance, negotiation, and responsibility in relation to multiple voices and identities. Reading and writing not only modify and interpret our perceptions and thinking, but also create our identities and experiential subjectivities.

Benefits of expressive/reflective writing and a "danger zone"

Expressive and reflective writing exercises can increase participants' *self-observation and understanding* of their creative potential and how to use it in their lives. They can increase participants' ability to focus on their *life story* and to arrive at personal ideas, conceptualizations and subjective as well as intersubjective dialogic and living truths.

Moreover, such exercises tend to develop participants' *reflexivity and self-awareness* of their life process, considering the multiple and changing discursive practices and points of view at different socio-cultural and cognitive-affective levels. Participants can *explore and map* their own mindsets, frames, concepts, scripts and stories.

The development of *metacognitive and self-reflective skills and strategies* ("I know how, when and where I construct knowledge") is one of the outcomes of such writing. Related to this is the development of *meta-emotional appraisals* (Ihanus, 2007) of how, when and where we have felt, might have felt, are feeling, and will probably feel in the future, and how others have felt, might have felt, are feeling, and will probably feel in the future. We also learn to regulate our emotion-based, meaning-oriented, and future-oriented coping strategies and relationships. When facilitated, such exercises tend to have broader and *deeper effects on personality*, producing flexible coping and resilience.

Literature can lead one deeper into the mindscapes of nostalgia. For example, in his *Life on the Mississippi* (1883, Chapter 55), Mark Twain describes how ages, times, and identities are layered:

"During my three days' stay in the town, I woke up every morning with the impression that I was a boy—for in my dreams the faces were all young again, […] but I went to bed a hundred years old, every night—for meantime I had been seeing those faces as they are now."

The therapeutic space of literature is manifested in the present, but it covers the whole lifespan. The places of memory in literature embody nostalgia that extends from the past to the present *vantage points of memory*, while the future is dawning.

Literature is a curious therapist. It can emancipate people from self-deception and break the icy crust of the mind, but in breaking the crust, it leads to a "danger zone" where you "can seriously damage your sadness", be "in danger of achieving your dreams" and finally be in "danger of learning you're alive" (Bolton, n.d.). The treasure of the arts includes dawning light, song, music, visions and words, embracing all life forms and life skills, and growing through the ages. The means of the arts are not weapons of war, but incentives for loving expressions of peace.

Language and the literate mind/brain are not predetermined; they do not constitute a ready-made constellation in human beings but go through multifaceted developments in different interactions and environmental contexts. Literature seeks, transforms, and translates traumatic memories and shameful emotions into growth through inspiring expressions, without neglecting pain, suffering, and loss in the human predicament. While participating in biblio/poetry therapy, people process their moods and other mental states and express them imaginatively and metaphorically, opening themselves to the depths, possibilities and resources of poetic language. Such enthusiastic participation in poetic moments of meaning provides perspectives of hope that make life worth living, with its dreams, desires, and surprises.

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Bibliotherapy as Narrative Practice
Reader Empowerment Through Re-Authoring Conversations

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Abstract

Based on the view that reading literature is a dialogical act of decentring and co-authoring, narrative bibliotherapy can achieve reader re-empowerment in the face of culturally dominant discourses which are at odds with a person's values and beliefs causing suffering and oppression. The aim is that readers regain a sense of agency in the re-authoring of preferred life narratives, inspired and driven by what they give value to, potentiating wisdoms that underpin them. This article examines several key concepts and practices of narrative therapy as developed by Michael White and David Epston and their application to bibliotherapeutic practice, establishing a clear link between the poststructuralist foundations of both practices. Example questions about a poem support the examination of the bibliotherapeutic use of externalising conversations; deconstruction of culturally dominant discourses; finding exceptions in the problem story and re-authoring alternative stories. It argues that alongside the benefits of this practice for the individual, the power of each reader's voice and its reverberations in the collective become forces for both individual and societal change.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, narrative therapy, story, re-authoring, discourse, deconstruction, agency

> *Waiting for a world to be unearthed by language, somebody is singing the place where silence is formed. They will later discover* that just because it displays its fury doesn't mean the sea—or the world—exists. *That's why each word says what it says and more and something else besides.*
> —Alejandra Pizarnik, 'The Word that Heals'[1]

> *In considering therapy as a context for the re-authoring of lives and relationships, I have proposed a "therapy of literary merit"*
> —Michale White, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*

The experience of reading literature can be transformative: seeing ourselves reflected in stories, finding words in a poem that speak about -and to- us can enable us to approach difficult feelings or complex situations at a safe distance. Considering characters, plot, setting or point of view, the elements and layers of our own stories which may at times feel like a confusing and oppressing mess, can begin to be disentangled. We can then tease out what may be causing us pain and tenuous threads of resistance and potential change begin to

[1] My own version of a translation by Yvette Siegert. The original poem, 'La palabra que sana' was published in Pizarnik's last book, *El infierno musical* (1971) and translated by Siegert in Pizarnik, A. (2013). *A Musical Hell*, (Yvette Siegert Trans.). New Directions.

emerge. What is more, where one text opens a plurality of meaning to just one reader, the meaning-making possibilities in a community of readers grow exponentially. Literary texts act not just as mirrors to, but as shapers of the multi-storied nature of people, with collective meaning making becoming a powerful force of social cohesion.

Interacting with literature affords safety: the text becomes a place where it is not only safe to be but also safe to question; and which the reader is free to leave at any time. This brings to the fore a landscape of possibility for the reader's life who will discover that they do not have to exist in a problem story. Interacting with literature in this way makes empowerment and the retrieval of agency a real possibility by developing awareness that it is always possible to find exceptions, sparkling events (White, 1991), deep rooted resources and wisdoms within a problem story. Pulling those sparkling threads out to embroider a new tapestry for themselves puts the reader at the centre of their own story, not as a passive protagonist, but as its maker.

This paper refers to the narrative bibliotherapy as a bibliotherapeutic practice which inserts itself within the theoretical and practical frameworks of narrative therapy. It aims to show a reciprocal relationship between the two practices, where narrative therapy may benefit from using literary texts while bibliotherapy may be conducted within the conceptual framework and use of narrative approaches and techniques. As part of this exploration, I refer to the reading of a poem by Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik to provide examples of how some of the narrative concepts I examine can work in practice. It is also an invitation for you to partake in this and observe how this way of experiencing literature might work for you. Occasionally and more generally, I also refer to elements and other examples of my own practice, with the aim of sharing the experiences that have informed the development of what I have come to understand as my personal theory (Kelly, 1955). While a general overview of narrative therapy is offered, the aim of this piece is to focus on the processes leading to what is known in narrative as re-authoring conversations.

Consistent with narrative therapy's 'respectful, non-blaming approach, which centres people as the experts in their own lives' (Morgan, 2000), my work places the reading self in the centre of the reading experience, as collaborative meaning-maker in a journey towards regaining a sense of agency with which to re-author their life narrative. With Michael White (1991), my view of the reading self is not an essentialist one, but rather that of a contextualised individual whose existence is shaped by certain 'modes of life and thought' (Bourdieu, 1988) and who is invited, by the very act of reading, to become aware of the extent to which their life is shaped in this way; and to be in a position to decide whether they might choose other 'modes of life and thoughts' by which to live their life. In this context, I consider literary texts as conducive to, and enabling of this meaning-making process, rather than as authoritative sources of pre-existing truths.

While the term first appeared in print in 1990 with the publication of Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends (White and Epston, 1990), coauthored by Australian social worker and family therapist Michael White and New Zealand therapist David Epston, narrative therapy was first developed by White in the late 1970s (Madigan, 2019). It is a postmodern, social constructionist approach to psychotherapy and community work (Freedman & Combs, 1996) in which the therapeutic relationship is de-centred, and rather than being seen as problematic, the person is considered the expert in their own life. Thus, problems are seen as separate from the person, who is assumed to have existing competencies, skills and wisdoms that can help them to reduce the impact of problems in their life (Morgan, 2000).

The therapeutic stance in narrative therapy has been described by White (2007) as decentred yet influential, where the therapist assumes the role of co-editor in the person's meaning-making process, rather than as a figure of knowledge and authority who provides diagnoses, interpretations and solutions. Thus, the narrative therapist's attitude is one of openness, curiosity, awe and optimism, with unswerving belief in the person's wisdom, and hopeful that there is always an alternative story. With the person at the centre, the therapist remains influential in that they provide structure to the person's inquiry, mainly by asking questions (White, 2007), thus bringing forth a 'multisited and multistoried idea of the subject' (Madigan, 2019, 4). This shift away from a figure of authority who is neither central nor neutral is comparable to the decentring that occurs when the author of a literary text is displaced by the reader as the primary subject of inquiry (Madigan, 2019, 4) and the author function (Foucault, 1977) becomes uniquely transformed by each reader's set of assumptions and beliefs.

As a bibliotherapist in tune with these ideas, my practice focuses on conversations with the people who consult and read with me, held in the hope that our voice and its reverberations in the collective become forces for positive change; and in the hope that together we may:

- Focus on meaning-making conversation prompted by a literary text.
- Experience the reading of literature as co-authoring
- Allow literary texts to help us start difficult conversations and identify our own problem saturated narratives
- Consider identifying and deconstructing received and dominant discourses.
- Be inspired by our own and each other's wisdoms and what we give value to, so that we can regain a sense of agency.
- Identify and support exceptions, 'sparkling moments', preferred narratives which may lead us to re-authoring conversations.

When two or more people share the reading of a literary text, the experience affects each reader in a unique way, as each person brings their own worldview, values, hopes and dreams, and their state of mind at the moment of reading into this encounter with the text. I could invite you to read with me the poem 'All Night I hear the Noise of Water Sobbing' by Alejandra Pizarnik (Pizarnik, 2018), for example.[2] I would start by inviting you to focus on the act of reading itself to place you at the centre of this experience. Whether you have read the text prior to our conversation, or we are reading it together, quietly or aloud, this might entail having a conversation about what reading this text was like for you: imagining that you could observe yourself reading and noticing how your body, your emotions and your mind reacted. I might ask you what thoughts crossed your mind, or what your facial expression was. I might also ask you to describe the experience using only one word, or perhaps referring to a sound, a scent or a texture, for example. I might even suggest a brief guided meditation, inviting you to become aware of your body and the space it occupies, focusing on the rhythm of your breath, visualising a place that feels safe. In this way, together we create and hold a space of safety and non-judgement, in which your voice becomes strong and audible.

[2] Full text of is available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147376/all-night-i-hear-the-noise-of-moaning-water where the poem is reproduced by permission of the copyright holders.

I will then ask questions such as whose voice you hear in the poem, whether it feels familiar and how this familiarity or newness feels. I will be curious to know who you think is being addressed, how you imagine them, what has happened and what they might be feeling. These questions aim to identify and name what is happening to the person in the poem, to consider their context and what is important to them: the values and beliefs that shape their life. We can then begin to deconstruct this, making the familiar strange, 'exoticizing the domestic' as Bourdieu suggests (1988), but going further, with White (1991), deconstructing self-narratives, dominant cultural knowledges that persons live by; the dominantly cultural practices of self and of relationship and the discursive practices of our culture themselves. By noticing the discursive practices that may shape both what we find in the text and our reactions to it, it becomes apparent that it is possible to separate the two.

As we consider what we perceive is important to the voice in the poem, we become aware of both the impact of those dominant beliefs on us and what we give value to. Loosely, this is known as 'landscape of identity' in narrative therapy (originally referred to as landscape of consciousness) and it is 'constituted by the interpretations of the characters in the story, and also by those of the reader as s/he enters […] the consciousness of these characters.' (White, 1991, 28). As we look more closely, the problem story begins to emerge as distinct from this landscape of identity as we recognise that it is at odds with what the person gives value to, thus causing suffering, or oppression, for example. In the case of this poem, we may consider this to abandonment, sorrow, loneliness. Or it may be that other readers notice something else as problematic: it will depend on what in the poem has touched a nerve with that each reader. I may ask whether you recognise yourself in any of the emotions, actions, wisdoms, hopes that you see in the poem. To be more curious about this, I may ask what these difficult feelings speak of for you.

The more questions we consider, the more closely we are invited to look at the text. But this does not seek to uncover hidden meanings, erudite interpretations or ultimate truths. I may ask you what wisdoms you think the 'I' in the poem has amidst the problematic story and how these are conveyed to us. In this way, we listen out for exceptions to the story, tiny little gems sparkling beneath the surface or in between the words of sorrow. These nuggets of hope are the wisdoms that we believe the person has, and they help us to start envisaging the possibility that they can slowly begin to embroider an alternative to this story of sorrow. And, hopefully, we can imagine this new story becoming a force for positive change.

A careful, in-depth examination of the tangible outcomes of such process far exceeds the scope of this piece. It is, however, a powerfully transformative one, in which each reader's meaning-making process, in collaboration with their bibliotherapist (and fellow readers when in a group setting) makes it possible to conceive and flesh out an alternative story, a process through which readers become empowered and regain a sense of agency that possibilitates change. Although it may very often feel alchemical, of course none of this happens magically, but rather much of it is a question of language.

Using writing in her work with terminally ill patients, narrative bibliotherapist Michal Simchon (2013) observed that words in poems acted as anchors for people to express feelings which 'had previously been indistinct and diffuse' (3), providing a much-needed language 'that addresses the soul and that can provide words for which there are no words' (2). She also refers to narrative therapists Chris Behan (2003) and Jane Speedy (2008) who reflect that poetic language is transformative and capable of producing change, given that it is 'alive, multifaceted, dynamic, creative, eminently suitable to the nature of the narrative thought that

aims to reveal the multiple stories that are told during therapy' and 'most appropriate to the post-structural approach, which seeks to discover other voices that hide behind the familiar, dominant, routine voice' (Simchon, 2013, 3).

Based on the Foucauldian notion that discourse constructs reality, narrative therapy focuses on people's life storying; but it is not a literary intervention per se. Rather, as Michael White explains, it engages with narrative as a metaphor in the development of therapeutic practice, encouraging people to engage in storying their lives, as they routinely do, but focusing on some of the events that to which they would otherwise pay least attention (Denborough, 2001). The narrative metaphor refers to the way in which stories shape people's lives, provide structure and have real effects, rather than reflecting or mirroring them (White, 1991). However White (2007) did find parallels between literary stories and therapeutic practice, paying particular attention to Jerome Bruner's concept of 'subjunctivity' (Bruner, 1986) as the rich realm of possibility in storytelling. Thus, White (2007) considered effective therapy to be 'about engaging people in the re-authoring of the compelling plights of their lives in ways which arouse curiosity about human possibility' (75), as a skilled practice 'can assist people to have a fuller participation and stronger voice of authorship in the construction of the stories of their lives' (77).[3]

Prioritizing rich story development in therapeutic practice consists in drawing people's attention to gaps in their storylines and carefully constructing the scaffolding of these gaps around neglected events in their lives, in the hope that 'people's lives become more evidently multi-storied as these events are identified and thickened' (White, 2007, 81). Similarly, readers 'recruit their lived experience' (81) to fill the gaps in a literary text. As I have mentioned before, narrative therapy seeks to tease out the impact that culturally dominant discourses have on people's life narratives: when these are at odds with a person's identity narrative, a problem story begins to emerge, causing a sense of oppression and suffering. With genuine curiosity and based on the belief that people are multi-storied, narrative therapists employ a double-listening strategy to listen out for a person's identity narrative within the problem story. So rather than seeking to interpret or uncover a hidden meaning behind the person's words, the aim is to identify what people give value to by spotting exceptions to the problem story.

In this way, my initial questions about your experience of Pizarnik's poem are a way of inquiring about your value system, you landscape of identity, rather than the 'truth' of the text, the author's intentions or any 'correct interpretation' of it. If, as Wolfgang Iser (1972) wrote, 'the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence' (279), this occurs as readers bring into this convergence their identity stories, their multi-storied selves. As Michel de Certeau (1984) pointed out, we invent in the texts something different to what might have been intended, we detach them from their origin, combining their fragments and creating something not known before in the space which organizes their possibilities to allow a plurality of meaning. Often the first thing readers notice in a text is that which matches -or strongly challenges- their value system. Exploring a negative reaction to a text, for example, allows a closer look at what a reader holds truest and dearest, and which may have been called into question. Deconstructing these ideas offers the possibility of considering a choice for the reader to distance themselves from notions that feel wrong; or to reaffirm a position or belief that feels in tune with their preferred worldview.

[3] A more comprehensive examination of the text analogy in narrative therapy is offered in Madigan, S. (2019). *Narrative Therapy*. APA.

Sarah McNicol (2018) writes that bibliotherapy involves identification, recognition, catharsis, insight and self-application: the reader identifies with the characters, recognises his or her own situations, perceptions, actions, feelings, memories in the story; may experience a cathartic release of emotional energy, and after reflecting on these, gains perspective, develops awareness of alternatives and considers potential solutions. We may empathise with a given character, but we may also be judgemental (often judging them the way we judge ourselves). However if we stop to reflect on what in the setting, the general context within the story determines the way a character behaves, we may be able to see that while the character is, as Henry James (1884) once said, the determination of incident, incident is not necessarily, as he claimed, the illustration of character: the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem. Narrative therapy seeks to tease one apart from the other, thus externalising the problem: the 'I' in the poem is not defined by their sorrow or sense of abandonment or failure. Rather, once these ideas are separated from the person and deconstructed, they are exposed as part of culturally dominant discourses. These may be what shapes a person's view that being abandoned is a sign of weakness or failure in Pizarnik's poem for example. This identification through externalising conversation begins to make way for reclaiming agency in the reshaping of those views. I may go on to ask you what other oppressive ideas we find in the poem that we can tease apart from the person in it: engaging in these conversations, you may become aware of how these may relate to culturally dominant views that are at odds with your own values, thus causing you pain.

As mentioned before, the therapist can support the person in finding exceptions: threads of hope which, regardless of how small they may seem, can be lifted out of their problem-saturated story to create a preferred narrative. Asking more questions about a person's wisdoms, resources, strengths, support systems or significant relationships, can shift the focus on towards envisaging a new landscape of possibility, thus constructing and later thickening the alternative, preferred story. These conversations are what narrative therapy refers to as re-authoring conversations. I would now ask you to return to the poem and focus on the wisdoms, resources and strengths you think the person in the poem might have. I would also express an interest in those wisdoms, resources and strengths that you have brought into the text; and I would want to know what you would say to the 'I' in the poem, to start fleshing out their preferred narrative, and perhaps, in doing so, to start constructing your own.

I would then ask you how you have been inspired by the words in the poem as well as by the words of other fellow readers or people in your support system. In a group setting, readers would be invited to respond to one another in the same way. Other concepts and practices within narrative therapy are thus incorporated into bibliotherapeutic practice, such as that of outsider witness, the discussion of which exceeds the scope of this article and remains to be discussed elsewhere.

To conclude, as I have argued, literary texts enable the filling in of gaps that is informed by received wisdoms rooted in dominant stories arising from the cultural contexts in which we exist. Bibliotherapeutic conversations which incorporate narrative approaches and techniques make possible the deconstruction of these culturally dominant discourses, support the reader in finding exceptions, thickening and re-storying identity narratives. My invitation to read Alejandra Pizarnik's poem 'All Night I hear the Noise of Water Sobbing' and proposing questions aimed at demonstrating that close reading can make dominant discourses visible and available to either incorporate or challenge. It is also part of a wider argument for the use of seemingly pessimistic literature in the re-authoring of hope, although such a conversation remains the focus of further writing beyond the present work. This is borne out by the

questions aimed at structuring the identifying and naming of exceptions to the problem story to make possible the gradual re-authoring of a preferred narrative. In the midst of a problematic story (one which causes suffering), the reader can wonder what in the fabric of that story makes it so. They can then look out for glimpses of hope that may be hiding between the words or indeed signposted by certain images and words. They may consider what wisdoms they can bring into the story to find a more hopeful resolution; or they may decide not to affect the outcome of this particular story but, by empathising with one of the characters, instead of filling in the gaps, they may like to borrow some words, be inspired by an image, to bring back into their own story to thicken their identity narrative. It is always a two-way process in a multi-storied reality.

My bibliotherapeutic practice is conversation-based. In tune with narrative ideas, I bear witness to people's stories, listening, asking questions, supporting the re-authoring process. In this context, text curation can be rather arbitrary: I suggest a certain text or combination of texts as a way of initiating a journey which could end up anywhere readers take the conversation. As a text changes in each encounter with a reader and the reader is in turn transformed in unique ways, experience has taught me that people's journeys do not begin and end within a bibliotherapy session. They are, in fact, ongoing, 'unfolding' to use a word that Michael White was so fond of, so it is not for me to see, or indeed assess, a particular outcome there and then, as much unfolds long after a session is over. So it is, for me, a question of trusting the person, trusting the text and trusting the process.

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"Lyrical vandalism"
A template for the sublimation of rage in the age of ecological despair

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Abstract

The article presents a poetry therapy template for the sublimation of feelings of despair and rage in relation to ecological destruction. Based on examples of my own exploration of eco-poetry in *Landscape with Wind Turbines* (2024), I will show a three-stage process of working through feelings of anger, moving from semiotic to expressive modalities: destructive writing (using techniques of inversion, erasure, mutilation and interpolation); parody; and defamiliarization. I discuss how this process, which I have called *lyrical vandalism,* relates to the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation, where feelings of anger are redirected into a socially valuable form of representation. I then suggest a framework where sublimation is achieved by means of a gradual transmuting internalization of intertexts consisting of famous nature poetry. The template is based on two central premises: the iso-principle (meet the participant where they are emotionally) and the affection-principle (the participants must select model texts that they have been moved by).

Keywords: poetry therapy, ecological despair, anger, vandalism, sublimation, intertextuality, parody, shock-effects, defamiliarization

Introduction

Many students today are plagued by eco-anxiety, manifesting in either anger or apathy. A student in our BA programme in creative writing, in her early 20s, told the following story which resonated with her classmates: since her adolescence she has been very anxious about climate change and full of fury at adults for their unwillingness to deal with the crisis. And when she would express her concerns to parents, teachers and other persons of authority, she was typically met by the following response: "we are very sorry that you should feel this way". I consider such a response to be an instance of *empathic failure*: it intimates that the problem is *hers*, and that it is an intra-psychic one – *she* ought to change her feelings, it is not the world that must change. How can her emotions be met, and how may poetry help her channel her deep concern constructively? I share her despair about the destruction of the environment, and I have been exploring ways of addressing ecological disaster in my own poetry. Previously I have investigated how poems may create awe and wonder and thus increase connectedness to wonder. In this article I will trace a different path: how can poetry work with, and work through, the negative emotions of despair and rage felt by so many people in today's society (see for instance Pihkala, 2020 for an instructive analysis of Eco-Anxiety in the time of ecological crisis). Timothy Clark, in *The Value of Ecocriticism,* says that the conventional "emotive/spiritual" poetry is no longer possible within an "anthropocene context" (2019, 58–59), because it is little more than "a kind of personal therapy" collapsing

into "pastoral fantasy"; what is needed is a poetics that attends to the limits of the human in comprehending the environment (2019, 68). Various new forms of ecopoetics have been proposed in recent years (see for instance the volume *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics,* 2012, an experimental collaboration between poets Gander and Kinsella that combines both poetry and prose). I will outline an approach I have called *lyrical vandalism* that take the negative feelings as a point of departure. It aims to progressively clarify, modify and transform the emotion of anger. It is inspired in part by the self-psychology of Kohut, in which he shows how narcissistic rage may slowly be transformed into object love through a gradual process of transmuting internalization (Kohut, 1966). I will discuss a three-stage process which may be regarded as a method for the sublimation of rage. I will first discuss some problems related to ecological awareness and poetry. Thereafter I will attempt to differentiate between rage and justified indignation, in relation to the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation, before I move on to exemplify the method and discuss the principles of this eco-poetry therapy template.

The shadow side of our Sense of Connectedness to Nature

Positive emotions may result from people being captivated and engrossed by their natural surroundings; for instance, Ballew and Omoto have established experimentally how contact with nature elevates positive emotions. Their results "indicate that nature fosters awe and other positive emotions when people feel captivated and engrossed in their surroundings" (2018, 36-45). And conversely, a study conducted by Yang et al. "indicate that awe helps broaden the self-concept by including nature and increase connectedness to nature, which in turn lead to ecological behaviour" (2018, 1). However, contact with nature may also produce negative emotions. For is it not a fact today that the closer we get to nature, for instance by taking a walk in the woods, the closer we also get to negative emotions of fear, grief and anger as we are confronted by humanity's destruction of the environment? This is the *shadow-side* of our being connected to nature. The Connectedness to Nature Scale is a construct that has been operationalized in order to "measure individuals' experiential sense of oneness with the natural world" (Mayer et al., 2004, 504). However, all the questions of the CNS scale pertain to positive feelings of oneness and harmony. It does not thematize the tension between awe at nature and the fear, anger and despair we feel at seeing the consequences of our own actions.

Ecological anger is a complex phenomenon. According to Aristotle, any emotion involves not just an affection of the body and a cause, but also *intentionality:* towards whom is the anger directed? (Rossi, 2018). We feel angry, yet we ourselves are also part of the problem. In her article about the poetry of Peter Larkin, Emma Mason argues that our responses to ecological destruction

> have understandably been defined by anger and hostility to those who are perceived to be most at fault in the continued onslaught on trees and resulting wildfires, loss of clean water, and reduction of biodiversity in forests. The fury that drives these responses, however, is arguably founded on the same aggressive or strong thinking that underscores the violence it aims to oppose. The kind of thinking that might lead to a broad shift in consciousness with the potential to negate the logic of violence towards the other-than-human is a gentler one (2021, 68).

So how can we be gentle, and yet not suppress our despair and anger? Art therapy, according to Dalley (1984, 10) is "a path for expressing confused and improperly understood feeling via guiding them toward clarity and discipline". The expressive-creative category of Poetry Therapy encourages people to write, according to Mazza, as it "provides a vehicle for the client to express emotions and gain a sense of order and concreteness" (1999, 20). How would this apply to the most destructive of our negative emotions, anger and rage?

Eco-anger

Eco-protest may be regarded as a dialectic: a golden mean between acting out and repressing our destructive feelings. The most primitive form of eco-protest involving works of art consists in acts of vandalism where activists throw tomato soup onto famous paintings in museums. In such forms of protest there is no intrinsic connection between sign and referent. The art object is subjected to damage simply because it is very expensive. The wrath of the protesters is spilled onto art in an act of projected, and projective, rage. In no way can this be considered performative art. This is an anti-social action, born out of despair but perhaps mingled with self-righteousness and narcissism. It may be contrasted with that of animal rights activist Gary Yourofsky, who was livid at the injustice and cruelty towards animals, but "transformed his fury into a beneficial organization that improves and protects the lives of other sentient beings." (cited from Wisely, 1999, 1).

For something to qualify as art or poetry there must be some kind of transformation of materials. But there are other ways of metaphorically vandalizing famous artworks. The street artist Banksy has a painting in which he has used an impressionist technique to copy Monet's bridge over pond with waterlilies, but he has subverted the idyll by collocating debris, a traffic cone and a damaged shopping trolley, with the lilies in the pond. The Guardian art critic Jonathan Jones dismissively evaluated it thus: "A horrible matted version of a Monet painting with shopping trolleys and a traffic cone in the water. Is it satirising water pollution or mocking Monet? Either way it's kind of stupid." Jones misses the point here. Banksy himself has not categorized it as art. Secondly, the object of the satire is indeterminate. I will call such an approach destructive art, in the sense that it does symbolic damage to previous works, and at the same time does damage to the artists own reputation as artist, in the name of truth. The use of art and poetry to create a bridge from raw emotion to socially constructive behaviour is what in psychoanalysis is termed sublimation: diverting the expression of an impulse from its unacceptable form to one that is considered more socially or culturally acceptable. Before discussing what this process involves, I will look more closely at different aspects of anger.

Anger and indignation

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says: "Anybody can become angry; that is easy. But to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power" (Barnes, 1984). That anger is a negative emotion most would agree: It is unpleasant to have it and frightening to be exposed to it. What to do with it, bottle it up or act it out? That it can vary in intensity, from irritation to violent rage, is reflected in our language. Sometimes it can be childish and narcissistic ("I wanted that for myself!"), but it can also be justified: a considered and deliberate response to someone's transgression of our shared human values and laws. But this

crucial difference between my desires being thwarted and the violation of the common good is not clearly reflected in language. We have words such as wrath and ire, used more or less synonymously. It is clarifying to look at their etymology. Ire comes from the latin ira, which was deemed one of the seven deadly sins (from PIE root *eis- (1), forming various words denoting passion (source also of Greek hieros "filled with the divine, holy,"). Here we see that it is a passion or sin, but it is also being filled with the divine. Whereas wrath places the emphasis on being tormented or offended by evil or cruelty: Old English wrað "angry" (literally "tormented, twisted"). One could say that being filled with the divine or holy was an indication of a justified anger, but it is more pertinent to think that it is a self-justified sense of having the right to act out one's anger. The word that comes closest to signifying the torment at witnessing the suffering of other beings in the face of evil or cruelty, is indignation. It is defined as "anger aroused by something unjust, unworthy, or mean" (cambridge.com). According to Spinoza's Ethics, indignation is hatred toward those who have injured others (1996). Again, there is a painful and destructive component. How can one 'purify' indignation, so that it becomes a justified and socially constructive feeling or action?

One may consider destroying or damaging a painting in a museum as an expression of ire: a self-righteous passion. Whereas a non-violent form of protest at the suffering of other creatures at the hands of human-inflicted climate change and nature loss, would be an expression of moral indignation. The transformation of rage to moral indignation thus implies a double process: I must go from being certain that I am (in the) right to a state of negative capability, and I must go from blindly acting out to a measured and fitting response. In *All the Rage,* a psychoanalytically oriented investigation of the complex forms anger may take in our culture, Josh Cohen asks how we can obtain a "sense of what it would be to have a positive and meaningful experience of our anger" (2024, 152). To answer this question he distinguishes between "aggressive anger", which "stakes itself on the premise that if we already know we are right, we never have to get up close to our angry feelings, to listen to what they are saying, to what unknown anxieties and desires might secretly be driving them," and a libidinally driven anger, searching and vulnerable. The former is "an anger that is discharged in aggressive action before it can be contacted and listened to by the self who is feeling it" (2024, 179). The latter means that one neither allows "the wild horse of rage to hurtle towards blind action", nor does it mean suppressing or denying the anger. Citing Damasio, Cohen argues that this involves the experience of feelings rather than emotions. Whereas emotions are effectively stimulus responses to an event, feelings involve mapping these reactions to produce internal images of and ideas about them:

> Where emotions in Damasio's sense are essentially reactive stimulus responses (the realm of aggressive energy), feelings involve the internal mapping of those immediate stimuli, listening to and making sense of what they're telling us, raising our trigger responses to a higher level of consciousness. (…) *The transition into feeling means that emotion finds a footing in ideas and words, a mode of expression beyond reaction*. (153, my emphasis).

Feelings creatively process our affective reactions, facilitating "the possibility of creating novel, non-stereotypical responses" (xv) In Cohen's perspective, then, anger is "of a higher order than aggression, a transformation of reactive behavior into a kind of self-reflection" (2024, xv).

Thus the question becomes: how can the initially inchoate, and partly unconscious/unsymbolized aggression be transformed? Cohen cites literature as a way of exploring how anger can be marshalled as a source of creative energy. For instance, in the novel My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante, there is an episode where the main character protects herself from her abusive husband by creating a work of art. She uses a photo of herself in her wedding dress, and subjects it to careful deformation. (2024, 166)

Sublimation

Sublimation was a central concept in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, developed over time. According to Hartmann,

> When first used by Freud, 'sublimation' referred to certain cultural or otherwise highly valued achievements and to their derivation from instinctual (…) sources. These phenomena were also studied as ways to avoid conflict while still achieving discharge, to escape the necessity of repression; their relations to the reaction formation (and) their role in artistic creation was recognized (1995, 9)

Laplanche and Pontalis argues that "the lack of a coherent theory of sublimation remains one of the lacunae in psychoanalytic thought." Furthermore, they ask, should the social esteem accorded an act of sublimation "be taken as a defining characteristic of sublimation?" (1973, 433). Ken Gemes has attempted to give a coherent account of sublimation and its relation to social value, stating that sublimation involves redirection of drives ("aggressive drives may find sublimated discharge in nonaggressive behaviour") to more socially valuable aims (2009, 39). He identifies two problems herein: "the problem posed by the introduction of social valuation as a defining characteristic of sublimation, and the related problem of distinguishing neurotic symptoms from sublimations." (41). An issue connected to the latter is whether repression is part of sublimation, or whether the latter is an alternative to the former. A drive has both an ideational and an energetic/affective component. The repression of the former involves not letting the aim be apprehended consciously, whereas repression of the force involves not letting it be expressed in outward action. But "all sublimations involve an expression of a pent-up quota of affect", argues Gemes (43). What sublimations undo is the repressing of the energetic component, directing it into a 'higher' or socially valuable outlet. Gemes brings in a Nietzschean perspective to differentiate, saying that "sublimations involve integration or unification, while pathological symptoms involve splitting off or disintegration" (48):

> It is not that the ideational component of the drive ceases to be suppressed but that the suppression takes on a conscious form that *somehow* allows the energetic component formerly associated with it to be redirected to new, more acceptable ends. (44, my emphasis).

It is the somehow that my approach to poetry therapy explores. How may symbolic writing exercises lead to a "cathexis of a substitute" so that the impulses "find their outlet" and work towards an increased integration of the self? Hanna Segal, in her "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Aesthetics," concludes that "a satisfactory work of art is achieved by a realization and sublimation of the depressive position." (1952, 206). Through symbolic

representations art allows us to take objects towards which we have sadistic hostile impulses and reintegrate them into a world that is "whole, complete and unified" (1952, 204).

In the following I will explicate how I have employed this in my latest poetry collection, Landscape with Wind Turbines (2024), for working with the aggressive impulses towards reintegration.

What kinds of poetics are appropriate?

The irony of the Green Shift is that in our efforts to remedy man-made climate change by introducing renewable energy, we create new problems by further destroying the landscape and wildlife. I have explored the emotional space between grief over lost species (past-directed) and anger (future-oriented) at ongoing demolition of the natural environment. The first section of the book deals with a double loss: birds that are becoming increasingly rare, but also our bird blindness: the fact that many people can no longer discern different birdsongs and different types of birds. These poems may be a form of lamenting the loss of pastoral fantasy, but are still in the elegiac mode. But in the second section I attempt to follow Jahan Ramazani's injunction that "eco poetry must transcend the elegiac mode" (2020) and acknowledge the strangeness of our situation. It explores various anti-aesthetic strategies for creating protest poetry, ranging from shock effects to concrete poetry. I found myself working with and through my own rage, in a three-stage process. The first stage may be called destructive writing, not so much a creative-expressive form of writing but of performing operations on already existing nature poetry in a mimetic act of repeating the destruction of nature and landscapes. The second stage used the satiric form of parody. The third stage returns to expressionism using defamiliarization and foregrounding. I will in the following briefly explicate each strategy.

From Eco-Anxiety to Creative Action: A Three-Stage Framework Proposal for Poetry Therapy

Stage 1: Destructive Writing

I took *nature poems that I love* and subjected them to inversion, erasure, mutilation and/or interpolation. This involves working with the materiality of the poem, or on what Julia Kristeva has called the semiotic dimension of language. For Julia Kristeva, the semiotic and the symbolic refer to two interdependent aspects of language. The semiotic is defined as the matriarchal aspect of language that show the writer's inner drives and impulses, manifesting in the tone, rhythm, images and non-semantic elements used. The symbolic is the rule-governed aspect of language, which show itself in grammatical structures and syntactic structures. The semiotic is associated with the maternal body. The symbolic, on the other hand, corresponds to grammar and syntax and is associated with referential meaning. With this distinction, Kristeva (1985) attempted to bring the "speaking body" back into linguistics and philosophy. In avantgarde poetic practices she found the recovery of elements of the semiotic that had repressed not only by society but by the symbolic order.

As an example of the inversion and mutilation techniques I will explain the operations I performed in relation to the romantic Norwegian lyric *Haugtussa,* by Arne Garborg. I was in

part inspired by the avant garde poet Lautreamont, who in his *Poesies II* (1978) states that plagiarism is necessary: "It clasps the author's sentence tight, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea." So I would take the opening, where the lyric subject says he will give his song to the landscape, I invert some of the words ('to' is changed to 'from', 'give' is change to 'take') in order to transform its meaning into its direct opposite – the human celebration of nature becomes a theft of the moors and their vegetation:

Fraa deg, du Heid og bleike Myr
med Bukkeblad,
der Hegre steig og Heilo flaug,
eg tek mitt Kvad.

Fraa deg, du visne Lyng um Haug,
der Draumar sveiv,
eg tek min Song um Dimd og Draug
og dulde Liv:[1]

Moreover, Garborg goes on to describe the beauty of the landscape. But since his time, the coastal nature has been much changed as wind parks have destroyed wildlife and natural formations. Thus I simply erased the very words for those objects that are now removed from the landscape, or the view that has been obstructed – leaving blank spaces on the page:

Det stig av Hav eit Alveland
med ;
det kvi mot Himmelrand
i kveldblaa .

Eg saag det tidt som sveipt i
bak Havdis graa;
det er ein huld, ein ,
me ei naa.[2]

[1] My own prose translation into English:

From you, Heath and pale Moor
With your marsh trefoil,
Where Herons rose and Golden Plovers flew,
I take my Song.

From you, withered Heather on the Hill
Where Dreams hovered
I take my Song about the Creatures unseen
And Life hidden

[2] My own prose translation, with the parentheses marking the words I erased:

Out of the Sea rises a land of elves
with (Mountains and Moors) ;
It (rests so clear against the sky)

This is not an instance of what is called erasure poetry. "An erasure is the creation of a new text by disappearing the old text that surrounds it", writes Mary Ruefle (2010, 78). It is the creative discovery of a new poem within an old text. Whereas the operation I have performed merely takes something away by removing elements from the poem's very landscape.

In Japanese poetry one can find a technique which combines copying with micro-transformations. The 17th century buddhist monk Enku used a technique called *okikae uta*, where he would take an entire pre-existing poem as source and simply change a few words: "change a word – / You make a new poem" (*In Heaven's River*, 2015, 17). The original poem was, according to the translator Julian Daizan Skinner, "usually one that was well known and would stand behind the new work providing depth and resonance." (2015, 17). Thus I took Goethe's famous and much-loved poem Über allen Gipfeln, ("The Wanderer's Night Song" in English, translated by Henry Wandsworth Longfellow) and first translated it into Norwegian with utmost care and devotion. Then I took a red marker pen and crossed out one word, and wrote another word over it, mimicking acts of vandalism often seen in public spaces:

over alle tindar	(O'er all the hill-tops
ei ro	Is quiet now,
i alle linder VINDTURBINAR	In all the trees WIND TURBINES
høyrest no	Hearest thou
så vidt eit sòg	Hardly a breath
småfuglane teier i lia	The Birds are asleep in the trees
vent, snart kjem tida	Wait, soon like these
for di kvild òg	Thou too shalt rest.

It was inspired by a literary movement known as *Turpismus* (after the Latin word *turpis,* 'ugly') that arose in Poland after the second world war, in which poets attempted «Elemente des Hässlichen in ein Werk einzuführen, um einen ästhetischen Shock zu bewirken» (Fleischer, 1989, 35)[3]. For me this simple act of interpolation (a term used in music theory to signifiy a device used to extend what would normally be a regular phrase into an irregular and

In the (still) blue evening

I saw it often draped (in Air)
Behind the sea mist grey
There is a (whole and holy home)
We (cannot) reach

[3] My translation into English: "to bring in elements of the Ugly into the work, in order to bring about aesthetic shock-effects".

extended phrase, by the addition of extra music in the middle of a phrase (Caplin, 2000) contains complex emotions: after the labour of love of translating it, the process of subject the poem to a violent act felt almost masochistic. But it also felt symbolic: a means of expressing despair and anger in a physical act of vandalism that at the same time re-actualizes the model text.

Stage 2: Parody

The second stage explores a different way of working with intertextuality: parody. In 1755 Samuel Johnson defined parody as "a kind of writing, in which the words of an author or his thoughts are taken, and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose." D'Angelo, in looking at the political uses of parody, states that "a parodist's play with a model's words was central to presenting a political development in a new light. An effective parody required retaining key words from the model within a new, coherent argument" (2010, 33), thus creating a dialogical relationship with its model. The manners in which parody used intertextuality was integral to its meaning. In her interesting article on the implications of parody in early American political song, Laura Lohman investigates how parodists representing competing political parties balanced mimesis and critique of their models "to mock political adversaries, refute opponents' arguments, and expose 'truths' obscured by their rhetoric" (2020, 36), thereby providing narratives that helped communities comprehend a rapidly changing political landscape (38). Parodic lyrics were a powerful and appealing means of exposing political truths during the first party system. The aim of the parody could be to ridicule, exaggerate, caricature, create incongruity or even pay homage, but in ways both satirical and serious. (Kiremidjian, 1969). The methods they applied to the model texts were many, according to Lohman: "imitation, alteration, quotation, adaptation, allusion, substitution, changes in tone or diction, and textual rearrangement" (2020, 39). Thus we see that parody in political lyrics was much more than how it is usually understood, namely as "the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material" (Rose, 1993, 52).

I created several such parodies. In one of them, Shelley's Ode to the West Wind, I translated the first stanza to correspond as closely as possible to the original, only to deviate from the second stanza onwards. Thus the original's

> Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
> Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
> Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

is modified into the epoxy-grey flakes of paint and the PFAS-particles from the wind turbine blades being charioted to their dark wintry bed.

Stage 3: Defamiliarization and foregrounding

The third stage seeks to integrate "destructive" and creative writing by combining intertextual elements with foregrounding of fresh imagery to create defamiliarization in order to let the reader see things in a new light. This is a gradually more 'creative' stage, in as much as it increasingly involves active imagination. I will give two examples (my own translations from the Norwegian). Firstly, I will quote the following poem in which Lautreamont's definition of

surrealism is modified and extended further to point our attention to endangered species in Norwegian nature:

poetry is
the wind in the leaves

poetry is
winged flight

beautiful as
the unexpected meeting

between a
wind turbine and

a white-tailed eagle flying
over the open coast

A translation problem here is that the Norwegian word «blad» means both leaf and blade. The intention is to initially give the reader conventional lyrical imagery. Thus the reader will assume that «the wind in the leaves» innoculously refers to the wind playing in the trees, whereupon the shock effect of the collision with the turbine is introduced, shifting the meaning of leaf into turbine blade.

The second example is a poem-suite, «Fugues», based on the famous Norwegian fairy tale *The Twelve Wild Ducks* (by Asbjørsen and Moe), in which twelve princes are transformed into birds. The poem addresses the reader directly, asking whether they have seen or heard a series of twelve different birds that are now critically endangered. Here are the opening two stanzas:

have you heeded the call
of the black-throated loon
looming over
the islets
in sultry hours

have you stumbled upon
a willow grouse nest
among downy birch sallows
while searching
for rest

The concluding stanza then introduces the re-configured fairytale by alluding to the (now more than) 1200 windturbines along the Norwegian coast:

have you heard the fairytale
of the twelve hundred princes
who were bewitched

and transformed into
wind wights

Thus the dialectic between familiar and the alien is intended to produce an aesthetic shock effect through defamiliarization.

A template for poetry therapy of ecological despair and anger

The problem with sublimation is in empirically demonstrating that the phenomenon exists:

> Some psychiatrists have claimed support for the existence of sublimation as a healthy defense mechanism. Vaillant and Vaillant (1990) and Domino et al. (2002) found that participants who were rated as using the defense of sublimation showed the most creativity. There has not yet been any even moderately convincing experimental demonstration that sublimation occurs (Kim et al., 2013, 641).

In their own attempt to provide experimental evidence for sublimation Kim et al. found indications that Protestants produced more creative artwork when they were asked to recall an anger-inducing incident and then forced to suppress their anger. They were given instructions to recall a time when someone made them very angry, and then write about it. (2013, 639). However, my view is that to find evidence of sublimation, instead of looking for increased creativity, one should look for a transformation of anger into indignation.

Based on my own explorative process as I have tried to exemplify it above, I wish to suggest a template for a way of working therapeutically with poetry to sublimate despair and anger. Through a gradual process of transmuting internalisation, by moving along an axis from the primitive to the more sophisticated, anger is played out first through mutilating or taking things out of the original model text. Subsequently, one may move into parody, where the intertextual model is extended and bent to one's own purpose. Finally, one incorporates intertextual sources to create new symbolical expressions relying on familiar foregrounding devises, in which anger is brought into dialogue with sorrow and fear (and potentially also wonder and awe), as recommended by Cohen: "Anger becomes less rigidly defensive at the point it makes contact with neighbouring emotions like sadness and anxiety", as this is where it shifts from being an impersonal form of aggression to a manifestation of felt inner life (2024, 168).

The template rests on two futher premises: the iso-principle and the affection-principle, the first of which is a central premise in poetry therapy as well as in music therapy. The iso principle was first postulated in 1944 by Ira Altschuler in regard to the use of music with psychiatric patients. It states that the therapist meets the client at a current body state with a musical element, then moves them to a new body state by modulating the musical element. (Goldsmith, 2020, 1) It is a loose term which can be broadly defined as using one or more elements of music to meet a patient's current state, then changing said musical element(s) to lead them to a different state. The state being changed can be mood, pain level, arousal, or a number of other states. This principle was introduced in poetry therapy by Leedy (1969) and Lerner (1976) (see Edgar, 1979).

The second principle, that of affection (Fuchs, 2014), is my own suggestion. Why the model intertext ought to be one that the participant loves or is fascinated by, is perhaps more difficult

to explain. One possible way of accounting for it is by way of a model derived from Philip Davis' book *Reading for Life* (2020, 70), where he adapts a diagram from David Bleich to show the power of translation and recognition in a two-way connection between the unconscious and conscious part of the self. The unconscius is triggered when meeting the 'right match' emotionally, thereby creating a resonance in which *emergent thinking* may take place in translating and expressing a felt sense. (2020, 71).

Conclusion

This article proposes that poetry therapy for ecological despair ought to, based on the iso-principle, start from the negative emotion of anger, and through a gradual process sublimate passionate anger into a poetic form of moral indignation. By discussing my own ecopoetic explorations, I propose a three-stage process going from «destructive» writing exercises (inversion, erasure, mutilation and interpolation), via political parody, to sophisticated forms of foregrounding and defamiliarisation, in a process of transmuting internalisation of intertexts that the participants have been affected by. The template is based on the twin premises of the iso-principle and the affection-principle, as well as the mechanism of transmuting internalisation in the gradual process of sublimation. Its efficacy for poetry therapy awaits empirical confirmation, but may provide a valuable starting point for poetry therapy practitioners to test the value of this framework across various settings.

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Why Bibliotherapy Works

Emotion, Empathy and Critical Thinking in Reading Fiction

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Abstract

The article explores bibliotherapy's theoretical underpinnings and mechanisms, arguing for its effectiveness in addressing psychological, social, and emotional challenges through literary fiction[1]. Bibliotherapy diverges from traditional reading by targeting specific issues and employing structured therapeutic processes, such as engagement, identification, catharsis, and reflection. Modern theories, including cognitive literary studies and ethical literary perspectives, provide evidence for literature's ability to evoke empathy, critical thought, and emotional insight.

Drawing on natural narratology and neuroscience, the paper emphasizes the embodied nature of reading. It highlights how literary fiction activates the same cognitive and emotional mechanisms as real-life experiences, enabling readers to safely explore diverse scenarios. The text stresses the role of fictiveness and mimesis in creating safe psychological spaces for self-reflection, identification, and transformation. Additionally, narrative techniques – such as third-person narrative – foster empathy and immersive experiences, integral to bibliotherapy.

The article concludes that literary fiction's multilayered and reflective qualities make it uniquely suited for therapeutic contexts, fostering personal growth and emotional resilience. Bibliotherapy's utility extends to both clinical and non-clinical settings, offering a scientifically grounded method to enhance mental well-being amidst contemporary challenges such as societal stressors and the rise of social media's negative impacts.

Keywords: embodiment, therapeutic reading, literary theory, cognition, narrativity, narrative fiction

Introduction

Since its origins with Plato, literary studies have known that reading literary texts affects readers. Numerous literary texts, from the very beginnings of the modern novel with Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or the classic *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert, even thematize the problematic aspects of excessive reading of literature, which can negatively influence readers. One can also think about Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and the protagonist's suicide, a topic not only

[1] The paper is the result of the research program P6-0265 Intercultural Literary Studies, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

discussed by the press at the time but also frequently referenced in modern literary studies as a text that allegedly caused a wave of suicides among its readers. In the eyes of readers and researchers alike, literature has an undeniable influence on its audience, and this influence is not necessarily always positive. On the contrary, as these famous examples show, the thematization of the negative influence of reading literary fiction occupies a more prominent place in literary history than the positive, even therapeutic, effects of reading. On the other hand, Aristotle opposed Plato's rejection of literature with the argument that literary creation adheres to different criteria of validity than philosophy and historiography. According to Aristotle, literature's importance does not lie in telling the truth but in being persuasive, evoking the emotions it intends to evoke.[2]

Modern literary studies, particularly within the field of ethical literary studies, have developed an explicitly positive stance on the significance of literature for society (e.g., Martha Nussbaum) and also for the individual reader (e.g., Anne Mangen). Although opinions differ on whether the influence of reading literary texts on society or individuals is inherently positive or sometimes negative, it is undoubtedly possible to assert that literature works. This belief underpins bibliotherapy as a method of reading literary texts for therapeutic purposes, whether in clinical contexts like clinical bibliotherapy or in non-clinical contexts (libraries, schools, etc.) as developmental bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy can occur solely through reading literary texts (Wimberley, Mintz, and Suh, 2015) or involve reading accompanied by discussions about the text (Zabukovec, 2017). Both forms are used, and even the first approach is based on bibliotherapeutic procedures.

The first characteristic of bibliotherapy – or bibliotherapeutic procedures – which distinguishes it from regular reading of literature, is its focus on a specific problem or set of problems. The problem should be individually defined according to the needs of the participant or patient, while in group bibliotherapy, defining a problem broad enough to be shared by all participants is key. Therapeutic reading addresses a psychological, social, or societal theme, reflecting on it and attempting to resolve associated problems.

The second distinguishing characteristic of bibliotherapeutic reading is *contrafactual reading*. This concept, already well known in contemporary literary theory, is typically applied to texts that use alternative versions of historical events to construct their fictional narratives. For therapeutic reading, this means isolating a specific aspect of the literary text that addresses and positively resolves a psychological or social issue, even if, within the narrative, the chosen aspect has a completely different meaning. Piskač and Marinčič similarly state that "therapeutic reading is not an entirely exact process; readers do not seek the 'correct' answer but practice connecting emotional metaphors in discourse with possible emotions" (Piskač and Marinčič, 2024, 20). For readers in bibliotherapy, it is not necessary to fully understand the motivations behind the actions of literary characters; rather, they create their own interpretation of these motivations, which they can then apply to thinking about themselves or the psychological, social, or other problems that the bibliotherapeutic process addresses.

[2] Compare Aristotle's definition of the tragedy and his distinction of history and poetry (Aristotle, 1984, 2320 and 2322–2323).

The choice of appropriate texts is crucial for bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapeutic theory is least developed in this area, emphasizing primarily the psychological aspect of text selection – such as the exposure of the problem and its positive resolution – while aspects of text functioning and effects, articulated by cognitive literary studies as well as older traditions like reception aesthetics and reader-response theory, are usually not considered. Similarly, bibliotherapeutic theory has not yet addressed the narratological, aesthetic, and axiological aspects of reading texts used in the process of literary bibliotherapy, which I regard as integral elements of the effectiveness of bibliotherapeutic processes.

Therapeutic reading, due to its focus on a specific problem or theme, follows a defined therapeutic bridging process. This process represents another characteristic of bibliotherapy, segmented differently by various theorists and bibliotherapists. Melissa Allen Heath proposes a detailed description of the stages of bibliotherapeutic reading: engagement, identification, catharsis, insight, and universalization (Heath et al., 2005, 568). The engagement stage involves developing an interest in the story; the identification stage involves the reader identifying with the literary character, their challenges, and their resolutions. A positive outcome is thus essential from a psychological perspective. Only identification enables catharsis, just as fear and compassion in Greek tragedy serve as steps toward catharsis, achievable only through immersion in the text.

Heath suggests that catharsis occurs when the literary character successfully resolves a problem. This presupposes an embodied experience for the reader, who viscerally experiences an analogous transformation to the literary character. However, the bibliotherapeutic process does not end there. The next stage, insight, involves exiting the aesthetic illusion and establishing aesthetic distance, where the reader consciously reflects on what happened in the story, their own life, and their experience of the narrative. This is a stage of rational analysis and reflection, leading to the final stage of the bibliotherapeutic bridging process: universalization.

Other bibliotherapists and researchers (Piskač and Marinčič, 2024) argue that such segmentation of stages is inappropriate, as they do not acknowledge the importance or even the existence of catharsis. The core aspect of bibliotherapy is not the reader's realization that, regardless of their problem, others have successfully overcome similar issues. Instead, it is the experience of acceptance by the community, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and alienation (Heath et al., 2005, 568). The essence of bibliotherapy lies in the participant transferring insights gained into daily life in the form of personal growth, changes in behavior, thinking, or even in how they experience life itself. This transfer is the final stage of the bibliotherapeutic process.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate why bibliotherapy works by using literary fiction, therefore addressing both forms of bibliotherapeutic processes mentioned and both clinical and non-clinical contexts. I focus on literary fiction and its role in therapeutic reading, as the research I cite, as well as the literary theory I draw from, highlights the numerous advantages of literary fiction in the context of therapeutic reading. These advantages are further explored in the third section of this discussion.

Reading and the Brain

Literary fiction is not typically read in a therapeutic way, that is, with a focus on the emotional and other underlying contexts of the stories. Nonetheless, the psychological experience of the reader during reading is processed through the same cognitive mechanisms as everyday experiences. This is a fundamental finding of so-called "natural narratology," first developed by Monika Fludernik and later elaborated by Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon in their most significant book, *Psychonarratology*, which underpins contemporary scientific research on the effects of reading.

To achieve the goals of bibliotherapy – such as changes in specific personality traits of the reader, their mood, behavior, or self-image – many conditions must be met, from the reader's motivation for change to the suitability of the bibliotherapeutic context and execution procedure. From the perspective of cognitive literary studies, the most important characteristic of reading is its *embodiment*. Embodiment refers to the connection between the individual cognitive processes involved in thinking, language, and, ultimately, reading, and the motor and sensory areas responsible for processing the physical, bodily position in space/time and in relation to the environment.

There are at least four different definitions of embodiment: embodiment related to body anatomy, to bodily activity or action, to body representations, and to bodily modes of representation (Goldman and de Vignemont, 2009, 154). Embodiment does not merely refer to the belief that human cognition – as the set of all mental processes, from sensation to emotion to thinking – depends on the dimensions, activities, and functions of the human body. Goldman and de Vignemont also consider embodiment as a mode of bodily representation. Regarding the embodiment of language, they specifically highlight neuroscientific findings showing that embodiment can be understood as part of linguistic processing at the levels of syntax (Tettamanti and Moro, 2012, 924–925.) and semantics (Aziz-Zadeh and Damasio, 2008). On the other hand, Tettamanti and Moro emphasize the complexity of linguistic processing, arguing that it cannot be explained by a "comprehensive MNS theory" alone but requires "integration of internal computational mechanisms and percepto-motor systems" (Tettamanti and Moro, 2012, 932). For literary reading, this means that embodied cognition operates at the levels of syntactic, rhythmic, metric, and other textual transformations, as well as at the levels of semantic and narrative aspects.

But first, it is necessary to have a broad understanding of the neurobiology of reading. At this level, reading begins when light falls on the retina. Then after 150 milliseconds, the Visual Word Form Area (VWFA)[3] is activated. Between 180 to 300 milliseconds after the signal reached the eye, it further travels via the dorsal and ventral pathways to Broca's and Wernicke's areas. And at the latest stage of reading a kind of holistic dispersed cognitive processing involves other interconnected brain centers, such as those responsible for long-term memory, social emotions, motor and sensory domains, depending, of course, on the content of what is read. Only 500–600 milliseconds after the stimulus has reached the eye do we become aware of what we have read. According to Paul Armstrong, this temporal description of reading could be termed the

[3] This is now a canonized hypothesis about the functioning of the visual cortex during reading, first introduced by Stanislas Dehaene in his book *Reading in the Brain*. For a more recent longitudinal study of this phenomenon, see Dehaene-Lambertz, Monzalvo, and Dehaene (2018).

"asynchrony of reading," as it involves temporally segmented and spatially distributed processes throughout the brain that are far from being purely cognitive but are also emotional and motoric.

The reading process thus opens a space for parallel activations of various brain regions, which underpin diverse modes of experience. A special case involves emotional words, which create unique stimuli that activate the limbic system, including the amygdala and cingulate cortex, in both brain hemispheres. Lionel Naccache et al. (2005) demonstrate that the reception of subliminal emotional words, particularly those associated with fear, processed in the amygdala, influences activations in this area much earlier than the classic language-processing areas (Wernicke, Broca) are activated. According to some data (Nakamura, Inomata, and Uno, 2020), this activation is concurrent with the VWFA activation; according to others (Naccache et al., 2005), it follows with a minimal delay (50–150 milliseconds). This suggests that the amygdala can process the emotional value of words simultaneously with orthographic and prior to syntactic and lexical-semantic processing.

Equally important are studies on the role of the motor system during reading and, specifically, research on the connection between motor representations and linguistic processing. Based on the theory of embodied simulation, semantic processing at lexical and sentence levels is associated with the operation of mirror mechanisms in the motor and sensory cortex. In short, when we read about an action or a perception of a literary character, mirror mechanisms simulate the feeling of that action or perception in the real world, even if we have never experienced or performed it ourselves. These processes may even be intentionally sensitive, meaning that individual neurons are activated only if the movement action is purposeful, not when it is accidental (Armstrong, 2013, 179, 181).

Cognitive processes, occurring in this order and the interconnected temporal relationships, are also recursive – interactions between individual regions are not unidirectional but can occur bidirectionally. Thus, later cognitive processes can influence earlier ones. For example, attention may return to an earlier part of a text if a reader encounters an incomprehensible or unknown word, prompting a rereading process, which may involve spelling out the word or more precise phonetic or motoric processing, such as vocalizing the word aloud. More complex examples include rare cases when, due to a negative memory or severe trauma, a reader subconsciously skips a word that could provoke extreme negative emotions and threaten their well-being. This is only possible if emotional processing occurs concurrently with semantic processing, albeit separately and long before conscious awareness of the meaning of what is read.

If reading were a simple cognitive or even purely mental process, identical for all individuals and executed in exactly the same way every time, such influences would not exist. Thus, the reader's intention, which is critical in bibliotherapy, as well as the text’s intention (e.g., addressing a specific psychological issue), can evoke impressions and experiences that differ significantly from other readings of the same text. From this, I infer that in bibliotherapy, the effect does not stem solely from "meaning," though it is important, nor does it stem solely from the reader's intention, such as the desire to change a behavioral pattern, though this too is crucial. Instead, the effect arises from the combination of these factors within the broader context of reading, particularly at the level of preconscious and embodied experience. The

process of therapeutic reading then builds on this experience, using guided discussions and questions to foster the reader's reflection and self-reflection, awareness of the problem, and its resolution.

The neurobiological foundations of reading processes, as briefly explained here, show that reading literary fiction affects the psyche of the individual reader. The experiences evoked during the reading of literary texts activate the same cognitive processes and occur in the same brain areas as they would if similar events were actually experienced. Conversely, literary fiction allows for a diversity of experiences in the "safety" of fictionality, something not possible in everyday real-life – and this is also not achievable by reading self-help books.

The Function of Literary Fiction in Therapeutic Reading

Considering the fundamental psychonarratological premise that reading literary fiction is embodied and occurs through the same cognitive mechanisms as any other reading, we can also explain certain peculiarities of reading literary fiction compared to reading non-literary factual texts, such as self-help manuals.

The first and most important characteristic of literary fiction is its *fictiveness*. Literary studies recognize several definitions of fiction: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. For bibliotherapy, the pragmatic definition is perhaps the most relevant. This means that the stories, poems, or dramas we read do not depict real people or events, but imaginary characters and perhaps even entirely impossible situations disconnected from the reader's real world and without direct influence upon it (Schaeffer, 2013). This allows for the establishment of a distance or distinction between the world of reading and the world of the story. The result is not alienation from the text but rather the opposite. A study by Pallaniappan et al. (2016) demonstrates that literary texts can be more effective for achieving long-term changes through bibliotherapy. However, the study does not specify which elements of literary texts contribute to these positive effects. On the other hand, certain cognitive studies (Altman et al., 2014) show that the effects of reading differ depending on whether readers believe they are engaging with fiction or factual material. Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) describe the effect of fictiveness in the reading process as *"stillness"*, which they define as an "empty space or time created as a result of reading processes […] a pause, a break, a moment of quietness, enabling readers to contemplate, for instance, a new way of perceiving the (over)familiar or to consider several narrative perspectives simultaneously" (Koopman and Hakemulder, 2015, 108). In this sense, fictiveness can be understood as a catalyst for achieving and emphasizing the effects of other textual characteristics, especially narrativity and literariness. If this is correct, literary texts play a key role in the bibliotherapeutic process precisely because they are fictional. They need not be taken entirely seriously, and it is possible to establish a distance between the story's events and the reader's real life. This distance ensures a safe space where diverse experiences can develop, amplified through the content of literary texts, and their multilayered nature.

The second aspect of therapeutic reading, associated with fictiveness, is the mimetic nature (*mimesis)* of literary texts. Unlike self-help manuals, which are also commonly used in bibliotherapy, literary texts approximate reality by imitating it, as Aristotle observed. They

create imagined worlds, events, and characters that live and act in a world similar to that of the reader – particularly from the perspective of the problem domain relevant to the reader's intent – yet not identical to it. This difference does not initially enable readers to recognize the problem developed in the literary text as their own but can serve as a catalyst for such recognition. Suzanne Keen, a proponent of ethical literary studies, considers this a fundamental characteristic of reading fiction, providing the reader with the freedom to either identify with or distance themselves from the problem. "For a novel reader who experiences either empathy or personal distress, there can be no expectancy of reciprocation involved in the aesthetic response. The very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void" (Keen, 2006, 212).

For the bibliotherapeutic process, this implies that literary texts, compared to non-literary ones, allow for a form of reading that can draw attention to textual elements that may not initially appear central but hold significant importance within the bibliotherapeutic context because they relate to the addressed problem. Literary narratives cover a wide range of themes, describing numerous places, characters, and actions, forming a more or less complete representation of the world. Within this, what literary theory calls *possible worlds*, literary texts incorporate themes embedded in convincing and comprehensive complexes of motifs and topics that are relevant to bibliotherapeutic intervention. What matters is that literary fiction constructs (*mimesis*) a coherent representation of a world where a problem – such as for example loneliness – can be addressed in a more convincing and complex way, situated within a network of other relationships and dynamics, e.g. working environment, school, family relationships etc.

This approach empowers the reader to take steps in the transfer relationship autonomously, according to their capacity and will. In the light of motivation for change, which is crucial in bibliotherapy, this therapeutic element is most significant. From the standpoint of literary axiology, such empowerment of the reader, enabling multilayered reading and multiple perspectives, points to qualities that suggest a higher value of the texts. This supports the claim – which is by no means self-evident – that higher-quality texts are more suitable for therapeutic reading than lower-quality, more transparent, and one-dimensional texts.

The third unique aspect of reading literary fiction in the therapeutic process is related to *narrativity*. The effects of reading narrative texts appear to differ from those of reading non-narrative texts, not only due to potential differences in content but also due to the narrativity itself. While many factual texts, such as self-help manuals written in the first-person singular, are narrative, many thematic and problem-based manuals lack narrativity. An interesting study by Peter Dixon et al. (2020) suggests that "a paucity of mental access leads readers to make their own inferences about the character's mental state, while the use of third-person narration leads readers to draw on their personal experience in order to appreciate the circumstances of the character" (Dixon et al., 2020, 177). The use of diverse narrative techniques can thus influence the potential effects of texts, particularly in the domain of empathetic engagement.

Research further shows that the narrative structure of literary texts enables specific reading modes and effects, such as immersion, identification, empathy, and compassion (Kidd and Castano, 2013), all of which play crucial roles in the bibliotherapeutic process. Narratives about characters, their actions, and their motivations allow readers to immerse themselves in the

perspective of the narrated character or narrator, fostering empathetic engagement and connection.

Conclusion

The use of literary fiction in therapeutic processes, both as bibliotherapy and literary bibliotherapy, holds immense potential. Literary texts, more than other types of texts, enable the elicitation of specific emotions, beliefs, values, and feelings, which can serve as the focus of bibliotherapeutic interventions. In an era where societal mental health is under strain encouraging reading, especially therapeutic reading of literature, represents a meaningful method of addressing and bridging numerous mental health challenges faced by individuals and society as a whole. Affirming reading as a tool for fostering stronger mental health is not merely an act of personal conviction among therapists but is grounded in scientific findings from literary studies, the characteristics of literary texts, and the cognitive mechanisms involved in reading. For over two millennia, literary studies have known that reading literature works; today, we also understand why and how it can be used positively.

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Biblio/Poetry Therapy: Mitigating Stress and Enhancing Creativity among Teachers in Croatia

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Abstract

Worldwide, stress and burnout persist as significant challenges for teachers, contributing to feelings of anxiety and depression. Burnout can have detrimental effects on teachers' health and is a known risk factor for diminished physical and mental well-being. Understanding the prevalence and factors associated with stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression among educators is crucial for addressing this pressing public health issue. Kyriacou (2001) identifies seven common sources of stress encountered by teachers: students with negative attitudes towards school and lacking motivation, disruptive behaviour and general classroom management issues, rapid changes in curriculum and organizational structures, unfavourable working conditions, including issues related to promotions, time constraints, conflicts with colleagues and parents and a sense of undervaluation within society. Taking into consideration these prevalent stressors, I have developed as a part of my CAPF (certified applied poetry facilitator) training a series of bibliotherapy and poetry therapy interactive workshops specifically for Croatian language teachers in primary and secondary schools. These workshops focus on mindfulness, navigating transitions, fostering creativity, promoting a sense of belonging, and enhancing empathy, following the Hynes & Hynes-Berry (2012) four steps bibliotherapy process: recognition (something in material engages the participant, catharsis) examination (intensification of first step, questioning: who, what, when, why, how, how much, wherefore) juxtaposition (putting side by side two impressions or objects to compare and contrast and come up with possible new insight) self-application (genuinely experienced previous steps evaluation – new level of recognition and integration).

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy process, teacher burnout, stress management, creativity, mindfulness, teacher well-being

Introduction

Biblio/poetry therapy is a therapeutic intervention that integrates literature with guided dialogue to promote emotional growth, self-awareness, and coping strategies (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012). By engaging with carefully selected texts, participants confront authentic emotions, leading to personal insights and the development of creative problem-solving abilities. This process, facilitated by an empathetic and trained practitioner, is tailored to align with the participants' experiences and needs, making it both dynamic and impactful.

Teachers face a variety of occupational stressors, as noted by Kyriacou (2001), students with negative attitudes towards school and lacking motivation, disruptive behaviour and general classroom management issues, rapid changes in curriculum and organizational structures,

unfavourable working conditions, including issues related to promotions, time constraints, conflicts with colleagues and parents and a sense of undervaluation within society.

Chronic stress and burnout not only reduce teachers' effectiveness but also pose significant risks to their physical and mental well-being. To address these pressing challenges, this study investigates the potential of biblio/poetry therapy workshops to alleviate stress and foster resilience among teachers in Croatia.

As part of my CAPF training with my mentor, Nancy Scherlong, I have developed a series of biblio/poetry therapy workshops tailored for primary and secondary school teachers in Croatia. This approach leverages the therapeutic framework of biblio/poetry therapy to address the emotional and professional challenges faced by educators.

Bibliotherapy: A Structured Process

The process of bibliotherapy, as implemented in these workshops, is guided by the framework outlined by Hynes & Hynes-Berry, comprising four key steps:

1. Recognition: Participants engage with texts that evoke emotional resonance, facilitating a cathartic experience.

2. Examination: Participants reflect on the material through probing questions (e.g., who, what, when, why, and how), fostering deeper exploration.

3. Juxtaposition: New insights emerge by comparing and contrasting ideas and impressions within the text.

4. Self-Application: Participants integrate these insights into their understanding of themselves and their relationships.

This structured process combines analysis - deconstructing feelings and ideas into components - and synthesis - reorganizing these elements into a new understanding. As Frank (1973) notes, bibliotherapy enhances creative responses to unchangeable realities, improves self-perception, and deepens interpersonal awareness.

Interactive Bibliotherapy

Interactive bibliotherapy forms the foundation of these workshops, fostering growth and healing through guided discussions about selected material. This approach helps participants confront genuine emotions, enabling them to integrate cognitive and emotional responses to literature or audiovisual materials, and their own creative writing.

The facilitator plays a pivotal role in ensuring the effectiveness of this process by:

- Selecting appropriate texts that align with the participants' needs.
- Accurately and empathetically interpreting participants' responses.
- Guiding discussions to elicit meaningful self-reflection and deeper insights.

Through this process, participants engage in a dynamic dialogue with the material, the facilitator, and themselves, leading to new understandings and personal growth.

Workshop Design and Goals

The workshops are structured around four primary goals of biblio/poetry therapy, each linked to desired outcomes that guide the selection of texts and activities:

1. Shifting Perspectives: Transitioning from a problem-focused mindset to a solution-oriented approach while fostering creativity.

2. Emotional Identification: Recognizing and articulating emotions to enhance self-awareness.

3. Building Connections: Fostering a sense of belonging, boosting self-esteem, and improving interpersonal relationships.

4. Embracing Change: Navigating life transitions with resilience and adaptability.

These goals are achieved through stimulating mental imagery, surfacing associated emotions, and encouraging participants to explore new connections among attitudes, feelings, and experiences. Personal growth occurs when participants synthesize these connections, creating fresh perceptions that enhance self-understanding and reality orientation. This creative act of synthesizing new insights serves as the foundation of the therapeutic process.

Description of sessions and processes, results and findings

The workshops “Words that Heal”, “Creative Bridges”, and “Transitions” address seven common sources of stress encountered by teachers. They are scheduled during three particularly stressful periods in a teacher's work cycle: the beginning of the school year, the end of the first term/beginning of the second term, and the end of the school year. Texts for each workshop are carefully selected to address specific stress sources and desired outcomes. The workshops focus on themes such as mindfulness, fostering creativity, promoting a sense of belonging, enhancing empathy, and navigating transitions.

The opening workshop of “Words that Heal”, provides a concise overview of biblio/poetry therapy, outlining its origins, key methods, and the bibliotherapeutic process. Participants are introduced to the historical development of this therapeutic approach, which uses literature and writing to promote emotional well-being and personal growth. The session also emphasizes two essential concepts in the process: metaphor and catharsis.

- Metaphor: This concept plays a vital role in biblio/poetry therapy as a bridge between abstract emotions and tangible expressions. Through metaphor, individuals can articulate feelings and experiences in symbolic terms, fostering insight and new perspectives.

- Catharsis: Central to the healing process, catharsis involves the emotional release that occurs when individuals connect deeply with the literature or their own writing. This release helps reduce emotional tension and promotes psychological clarity.

Together, these concepts highlight how the creative and reflective use of language can support healing and transformation in a safe, guided environment.

During this session, mindfulness is practiced through carefully chosen poems: *Touch* by unknown poet, fosters awareness of the physical sensation of touch, highlighting its importance in grounding us and "Traveler your footprints" by Antonio Machado uses the metaphor of walking to explore a sense of grounding and creating new paths, helping participants reflect on navigating life's elements. This poem is enhancing awareness of the inner landscape and writing about one's life journey deepens self-awareness.

Through these poems, participants deepen self-awareness by exploring their inner landscapes and writing about their life journeys. Reflective writing prompts accompany each poem, effectively helping participants gain new insights, become aware of surfacing emotions and thoughts, and process these through self-reflection by naming their feelings and physical sensations.

The second workshop "Creative Bridges" emphasizes promoting a sense of belonging and enhancing empathy. Key poems and exercises include: "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver, which inspires participants to find a sense of connection and belonging; "The Secret" by Denise Levertov, which helps teachers rediscover motivation for their work; "Hopeless Cases" by Stjepan Lice, which encourages a shift in perspective when addressing students with negative attitudes. In this workshop, we focus on enhancing empathy and developing active listening skills through carefully designed exercises. Participants engage in activities such as creating emotional daily maps, which provide a visual and reflective way to navigate the fluctuating "sea of emotions." These maps help participants recognize and articulate their feelings while fostering a deeper understanding of others' emotional experiences. This activity demonstrates how naming emotions fosters calmness and emotional balance.

The active listening exercises emphasize attentiveness, reflection, and validation, enabling participants to practice truly hearing and connecting with others. This approach not only strengthens empathy but also builds more meaningful and supportive communication skills.

The third workshop "Transitions" is based on the Bridges' transition model (Ending, Transition, New Beginning). Each phase is examined and illustrated by chosen texts addressing the key emotions during each phase.

I. Ending, Losing, and Letting Go

(Key emotions: denial, fear, shock, delusion)

This phase highlights that every new beginning starts with an ending; change is triggered by something as captured in poems "Wake Up" and "Wind" by Adam Zagajewski."Yellow Tulip" by George Swede representing life's struggles, daily efforts, and persistence."Reminders for

the Advanced Soul" by Richard Bach the focus is on motivation to change, empowering the reader to inspire and provoke action.

II. Neutral Zone

(Key emotions: conflict, resistance, aimless energy, redirection, adjustment)

This transitional phase is explored through Joy Harjo's "Perhaps the World Ends Here", which symbolizes life's conflicts and the potential for renewal and redirection.

III. New Beginning

(Key emotions: hope, relief, doubt, enthusiasm, stress, anxiety)

Poems such as Rosemerry Wahtola Trotter's "Let Awake Be Awake" encourage embracing change, while John O'Donohue's "For a New Beginning" and "For the Traveler" emphasize optimism, courage, and persistence. These texts inspire participants to view each day as an opportunity for growth.

This series of workshops effectively addresses the main sources of stress among the teachers and through chosen texts and prompts achieving the following outcomes:

Main sources of stress	Workshops outcomes
Students with negative attitudes towards school and lacking motivation	Shifting from a problem-focused mindset to a solution-oriented approach; unlocking a successful classroom: the secrets of great teacher
Disruptive behaviour and general classroom management issues Rapid changes in curriculum and organizational structures	Identifying emotions and feelings; active listening Embracing change: navigating life's transitions
Unfavourable working conditions, including issues related to promotions; time constraints	Mindfulness, motivation, fostering creativity
Conflicts with colleagues and parents	Identifying emotions and feelings; active listening
A sense of undervaluation within society	Fostering a sense of belonging, boosting self-esteem, and enhancing self-awareness

Impact and Testimonials

This series of workshops has been conducted in 18 schools across Croatia so far, involving a total of 527 teachers. Post-workshop feedback and evaluations consistently underscore the efficacy of biblio/poetry therapy in mitigating stress and addressing burnout among educators. Participants reported that this therapeutic approach was entirely new to them and expressed a strong appreciation for its focus on their emotional challenges, which are often overlooked in professional development programs. The workshops facilitated reflective writing and guided discussions, enabling participants to gain deeper insights and develop innovative coping mechanisms to address work-related stressors. Quantitative results revealed that 99% of participants reported an improvement in their emotional state following the sessions, 90% indicated increased self-awareness, and 85% affirmed their ability to apply the methods in their daily professional practice.

The workshops have been shown to improve self-esteem and morale, encouraging participants to approach themselves with kindness, embrace personal growth, and navigate life's difficulties with creativity and resilience. By fostering a realistic and compassionate relationship with both themselves and the world around them, teachers find themselves better equipped to respond to challenges and embrace the opportunities inherent in their profession.

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The poetic body
Using gentle mindful movement to inspire poetry and transformation

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Abstract

This paper will describe a workshop that I delivered at the inaugural European Biblio/ Therapy conference in Budapest and explore some of the ideas behind it. The session introduced the ways in which a combination of gentle mindful movement inspired by the Feldenkrais Method ® of somatic education and expressive writing and poetry has the potential to inspire creativity and self-exploration. As a Feldenkrais practitioner and therapeutic writing practitioner here I outline my thoughts on these two practices and how they might interlink and potentially enhance the therapeutic process.

Keywords: movement, awareness, poetry, therapeutic writing, embodied, metaphor

Introduction and context

I have been a therapeutic and reflective writing practitioner in the UK for the past 14 years and over that time have facilitated groups in a range of contexts and with various clients, most recently medical students, health professionals and doctors, carers, older adults and people with mental health challenges. In this work I typically draw on techniques associated with poetry therapy and journal writing therapy. I often encourage expressive writing in response to prompts to encourage creativity and self-exploration.

In 2020, I qualified as a Feldenkrais practitioner after a four-year training in London. The Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, uses gentle movement and awareness to harness neuroplasticity and potential for learning, affording ease of movement and a sense of physical and emotional wellness. I decided to embark on this path for personal reasons; I had no idea of the potential connection that would develop between this discipline and my interest in therapeutic writing. However, I soon became aware that Feldenkrais was having a positive effect on my writing as well as the way I moved through the world both physically and mentally. I found that my writing was freer, it was easier to focus and let words and metaphors flow onto the page without judgement. I also felt as if I was more in touch with myself and that my voice became stronger. It felt like a natural progression to introduce some gentle movement sequences into my work with groups to see if this benefit could be shared.

The Feldenkrais Method ® was developed over a 40-year period between the 1940s and 1980s by Moshe Feldenkrais, an eminent physicist and judo master. According to Feldenkrais the unity of the mind and body is an objective reality, an idea increasingly borne out by scientific evidence (Maté & Maté, 2022). ‘A brain without a body could not think.’ (Feldenkrais, 1990). Feldenkrais discovered that combining awareness with movement, which preoccupies a large

part of the brain, could provide potential for re-education and lasting change in the way we move and think.

Feldenkrais developed thousands of movement sequences which he labelled Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons. Rather than working towards a prescribed posture or action, people are encouraged to explore movement and difference as a way of learning, in the same way a baby or infant might. This has the potential to harness neuroplasticity, improve fluidity and ease of movement. It can provide relief from pain, support for neurological conditions and enhance physical performance and produce a feeling of calmness and wellbeing.

My experience, and that of others, is that the practice of the Feldenkrais Method, which combines guided attention to heighten our awareness of ourselves and our sensations, encourages a sense of play and exploration. This can translate into inspiration for creativity and a more embodied kind of writing.

In my work I have been combining movement sequences with therapeutic writing sessions in a number of configurations. Sometimes these are simply to settle people's nervous system at the beginning of the session. At other times the sequences work to bring people's attention to themselves and their bodies in a deeper way, with the aim of encouraging a more authentic and fluid freedom of expression.

In late 2020, for example, I won a commission from the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK to run a lunchtime workshop for psychiatrists called "A Letter to My Big Toe", which was designed to take doctors 'out of their heads and into their bodies' by bringing attention to a physical sense of themselves through gentle movement. Participants were invited to write freely and expressively to a part of their body in the form of a letter and then craft a letter in response from their whole self. After the hour-long workshop, a number of participants reflected on shifts in perspective and a sense of acceptance that had occurred in relation to parts of their body that they had previously felt shame or anger towards.

In my work running a creative writing group for personal and professional development with medical students, I found that short gentle movement sequences followed by a stint of freewriting helped students to move from a professional medical persona that is focused on intellect and knowledge to a more grounded and integrated sense of themselves. This experience, when combined with freewriting – writing without stopping without attention to the constraints of punctuation and grammar as a means of accessing the unconscious and promoting creativity – seemed to put them more in touch with, and afford expression of, their emotions. One student described how this process encouraged 'words to flow from the body at ease with little resistance…I find it to be the most accurate way of discovering how I feel about something'. (Taylor, 2023, 229)

In addition, participants in a series of independent workshops that I have devised involving a more equal amount of movement (in longer sequences lying down) alongside writing and sharing, have found that writing flowed more easily and metaphors and images arrived more readily for them and in surprising ways. In the words of one, the movement sequences and prompts helped 'to tune into myself and to connect with a part of myself which is usually silenced …. It was this voice that spoke in the poem I wrote. I've never written a poem in this

voice before, but the words flowed out of me with ease.' (personal email correspondence, April 2024)

The Budapest workshop

It is against this contextual backdrop that I proposed and delivered the workshop which I delivered in Budapest. I am eager to involve others in my exploration of how the Feldenkrais Method of somatic learning can connect with therapeutic writing and creativity. The workshop that I designed was inspired by a line from Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese* (Oliver, 2020) – 'You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves'. Many people think of writing as a cerebral activity and my intention was to use this line to invoke a more embodied way of writing from the whole self. The workshop involved gentle chair-based movement sequences, expressive writing from prompts and poems and the opportunity for sharing.

Before starting the session I briefly introduced the ten participants to some principles of the Feldenkrais Method ®. I warned them to take care and that moving in new ways (and writing expressively) can throw up some strong and unexpected emotions. Even breathing in a new way can release feelings that might have been previously stored away somewhere. Participants were invited to remove their shoes, their belts and spectacles and to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

We started with a gentle guided Awareness Through Movement (ATM) sequence in sitting. ATM involves slow, repetitive and exploratory movements. I encouraged participants to find softness, to make movements small and slow and to focus on finding ease and reducing effort. In this way we can learn easier ways of movement, break old habits and holding and this in turn can lead to new ways of thinking.

The first movement sequence was focused on finding connection between the floor and feet, on connecting the pelvis to the chair and then the pelvis and shoulder girdle. This also involved a number of rests and pauses to allow the brain to respond and concluded with a gentle rocking of the pelvis allowing the trunk and shoulders and arms and head to follow. I then invited participants to write freely and continuously for six minutes in total using the prompts: 'My soft animal body…' followed by 'I feel…' and then 'I am curious about…'

Participants then introduced themselves using a word or phrase that emerged for them from the process and sharing what they felt curious about. I often use poems as prompts with groups for their potential to both hold emotional ambiguity and to elicit a visceral response. For this workshop I chose Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower* (Rilke, 1960) for us to read together and discuss. The poem nods to the idea of embodiment, breath, agency, space and transformation and to movement back and forth.

I encouraged participants to sense how the poem made them feel and to note any words or lines that stood out for them. I then led everyone through another 15-minute movement sequence which focused on the soft and rhythmic movement of the hands and fingers. Once again participants were invited to write freely afterwards for three or four minutes and then to write for a further seven minutes in direct response to the poem. The group then split into pairs and

were given an opportunity to share their writing with a partner or to talk about their experience of writing following movement.

We then came back together as a group and I asked everyone to say goodbye using a phrase or word that came to them in response to the workshop.

Participants at my movement and writing workshops have generally reported feeling much more grounded before starting to write, and much more in touch with themselves physically and emotionally. Often they find that this is a novel feeling for them, and have been surprised by what has flowed out onto the page. In line with this, the ten participants in Budapest described finding themselves in a calmer, softer, and physically and emotionally freer place than at the start of the workshop. The words curious and inspired also emerged.

Some Observations

Although my findings here are provisional and anecdotal, I have begun to develop some ideas on how Feldenkrais and Awareness through Movement can enhance the process of therapeutic writing. My proposition is that participation in movement and awareness sequences before writing activity enhances freedom and fluidity of expression, particularly when combined with freewriting or flow-writing. ATM calms the central nervous system, and cultivates a grounded and centred state of being before we start to write. In my experience this calmer, more embodied and softer state allows our unconscious thoughts to flow more readily onto the page.

I have also found that inviting participants to freewrite or write expressively — without attention to grammar or punctuation — for a few minutes following a movement sequence has allowed for an enhanced sense of freedom and play. This is what Creme and Hunt identify as a 'freer and more spontaneous experience of creativity' (Creme & Hunt, 2002).

Freewriting is a form of expressive writing, which has been shown in a number of experiments by James Pennebaker, when linked to writing about a traumatic experience, to ease emotional pain and improve physical and mental health (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). It is my suggestion, for reasons mentioned above, that movement sequences in advance of expressive writing has the potential to enhance this therapeutic process.

Sense of Self/ Felt Sense

I am also interested in the idea that writing following an ATM may enhance the way we sense ourselves, which according to Bessel van der Kolk (2014) is an important part of emotional health and regulation. 'Agency starts with what scientists call interoception, our awareness of our subtle, sensory, body-based feelings; the greater the awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives… If we are aware of the constant changes in our inner and outer environment, we can mobilize to manage them.' (van der Kolk, 2014, 222)

Moshe Feldenkrais also elevated the idea of self-image and the importance of us having a sense of ourselves. In the method he developed this through working with skeleton and relationship to

gravity. I also posit that these ideas are related to what Eugene Gendlin described as the 'felt-sense'—an inner knowing or 'special kind of internal bodily awareness ... a body-sense of meaning' (Gendlin, 1981). Sondra Perl (2004) has developed a writing method focused on harnessing Gendlin's idea of felt sense using mindfulness, breathing and relaxation. Perhaps writing provides us with further opportunity to attend to our senses.

Metaphors

I am also fascinated by the idea that our cognition is embodied within us in the form of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) propose that metaphors are rooted in our psychology from birth — for instance, the association of warmth with affection, weight with importance, sadness with down and happiness with up. We all allegedly embody these universal metaphors, but we also develop a complex network of personal metaphors reflecting our unique life experience.

Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) posit that the 'inability to translate traumatic experiences into language' or to 'translate powerful emotions into language appears to be psychologically unhealthy, linking our emotional memories to language is often beneficial.' Further, the authors discuss using imagery and metaphor as part of helping someone heal from traumatic memories or experiences: 'When we convert an image in our minds into words, it fundamentally alters the way the image is stored' (145).

Bolton (2014) suggests that it is when we let go of the cognitive thought process and have a sense of letting go that metaphors emerge: "metaphor reveals because it sidles up sideways, giving non-traumatic images for traumatic events. We often don't understand our metaphors initially, as with dreams, but when we do the illumination can be astonishing" (Bolton, 2014, 109).

I speculate that awareness through movement combined with creative and therapeutic writing could unlock opportunities for accessing and exploring the metaphors we hold within us creatively, but also perhaps for healing and making sense of our lives.

Conclusion

I am aware that this workshop was part of an ongoing exploration which calls out for further research and perhaps collaboration. I am not alone in suggesting the idea that movement and awareness have the potential to embellish and/or enhance the therapeutic writing process. There are other practitioners including dancers, yoga teachers and mindfulness practitioners who are on a similar journey of exploration with poetry and writing. I have more questions than answers about this work: I wonder, in particular, if there is anything about the Feldenkrais Method in particular that can enhance or facilitate the therapeutic writing process? And whether writing can enhance the changes facilitated by the Feldenkrais Method® and Awareness Through Movement process? I will continue in my exploration with these questions in mind. Meanwhile, I will also hold on to another oft-quoted line from Mary Oliver, one that is pertinent to these questions, to the creative process and to movement and poetry – 'to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work'. (*Yes! No!*, Oliver, 2020, 264)

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A Mothers' House of Language
Developing a Bibliotherapeutic Support Model for Narrative Agency in Motherhood

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Abstract

Motherhood is one of the most discursively regulated roles in Western societies. In discourses of motherhood, definitions are established for what motherhood should be, often overlooking what it actually is, which can create a profound disconnect between narrative and lived experience. Psychoanalytic feminist theory has addressed the subordinate position women hold in the symbolic order and called for a women's house of language as a place of their own in the cultural discourse. Crafting a place for oneself amongst the discourses and narratives requires narrative agency, the ability to make interpretive and narrative choices regarding one's life and the surrounding world. With biblio/poetry therapeutic methods, it is possible to explore hegemonic narratives as well as individual ones, and the dialogue between them. By applying the theory of narrative agency to the concept of a women's house of language, I have developed and implemented a bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers to support their narrative agency and help them build their own house of language. In this article, I will discuss the findings made about the method in my bibliotherapy group for mothers and explore the unique space offered by preventive bibliotherapeutic practice at the intersection of therapy, pedagogy, and activism.

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy, narrative therapy, narrative agency, house of language, socio-education, discursive self-defence, activism

Introduction

Motherhood has been called the unfinished business of feminism (O'Reilly, 2016, 2), and not without reason. The norms and ideals of motherhood have persisted through the upheavals of equality battles (Dally, 1982, 17), and as noted by the pioneering motherhood studies scholar Andrea O'Reilly (2020, 25), Western mothers today face unprecedentedly high cultural expectations.

We all face a multitude of external as well as internalised expectations in our many roles as family members, friends, and professionals. Problems arise when the expectations conveyed through various political, religious, medical, and legal discourses and narratives create an ideal against which to assess our performance (Woollet & Phoenix, 1991, 39–43), and the narratives carrying the expectations overwhelm our own understanding of what to strive for. In

motherhood, this can often be the case, as becoming a mother can be understood as a developmental transition, during which women may be particularly vulnerable to external expectations (Raudasoja, 2022, 12–14).

The combination of extremely high expectations and a heightened sensitivity to them is understandably problematic, as suggested by research conducted among Finnish parents. Even though Finland is considered one of the best places in the world to have children, according to the latest survey 15 % of Finnish birthing mothers report having symptoms of depression during the baby's first year (THL, FinChildren survey 2020), and Finnish parents are among the most exhausted in the world (Roskam et al., 2021; Aunola et al., 2020).

In order to find ways to support maternal wellbeing, we need a deeper understanding of the expectations, discourses, and narratives of motherhood as well as the individual's role within them. With biblio/poetry therapeutic[1] methods, it is possible to explore hegemonic narratives as well as small and individual ones, and the dialogue between them (Ihanus, 2022, 47–48). Dialogical group processes centering around literature can support the participants' narrative agency, the ability to practice agential choice of which narratives from the surrounding narrative environment to adopt and which to challenge (Meretoja et al., 2022, 391).

By developing a bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers and employing it with a bibliotherapy group, I aim to find out, whether and how bibliotherapy can help mothers challenge cultural expectations and build their own safe, brave place in language. This I will do as a researcher and a bibliotherapy group facilitator but also as a mother, struggling with very similar cultural expectations as my bibliotherapy group participants.

I will begin the article by discussing the problems facing mothers in their role as knowers, proceed to outline my method focused on strengthening mothers' narrative agency, and discuss the potential and the development areas of the model, framing it not as much a result as a starting point for new, differently designed and targeted working methods to bounce off of. I will conclude the article by reflecting on the contact points of therapy and therapy research with action research and activism, and raise the question of agency as pivotal in these boundary negotiations.

[1] From here on, I will refer to my practice simply as bibliotherapy. I make this choice for two reasons, both of which are related to how I personally perceive the nuances of “biblio” and “poetry” and what kind of meanings they convey in relation to my approach: 1) Even though “poetry” in poetry therapy has been used to refer not only to poems but also to other modes of literary expression, my emphasis on non-fiction genres such as essays and scientific texts as inspiration material warrants an even broader and slightly less airy concept — hence, “biblio”. 2) In both “biblio/poetry therapy” and “poetry therapy”, the word “therapy” stands alone and seems to call for attention. The term “bibliotherapy” is more consistent with my own non-clinical and narrative approach, which places less stress on the therapeutic aspect.

The discursive struggles and epistemic injustice of motherhood

"Is there a way to know, whether we are on the right track?" (Miiru)

Existential philosopher and phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (2000, 51) has referred to language as the house of being, in which human beings dwell. Psychoanalytic feminist theory has taken a different approach to the house of language, noting that it's not human beings who dwell in it but men, whereas women as building materials cannot themselves enter the house or the symbolic order. Therefore, women need their own symbolic expression in language and a place in cultural discourse; their own house of language. (Whitford, 1991, 48–49; Irigaray, 1985.) In my research, emphasis is placed not on sex or even gender but on the heavily gendered role of motherhood.

To approach the idea of a mothers' house of language, I explore motherhood as both a discursive and a narrative phenomenon. The circulating and competing discourses function as systems of meaning (Baxter, 2011, 2–3), shaping our understanding of the world. In discourses of motherhood, definitions are established for what motherhood should be (Hays, 1996, 21), often overlooking what it actually is (Rich 1995, 16). Narrative I conceptualise in Witten's (1993, 100) terms as "a singularly potent discursive form through which control can be dramatised, because it compels belief while at the same time shields truth claims from testing and debate". Both discursively and narratively, the question of motherhood is primarily epistemic: what qualifies as knowledge of motherhood and who is eligible to produce it.

To highlight the tensions between what is said and what is lived, the theoretical tradition of matricentric feminism has drawn a distinction between the concepts of *motherhood* and *mothering. Motherhood* is seen as an oppressive patriarchal construction bombarded with preposterous cultural expectations, whereas, in the concrete, everyday acts of *mothering* mothers can make motherhood their own. (O'Reilly, 2016, 19–20.)

Epistemically, this is no easy feat. According to the philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007, 1), there are forms of epistemic injustice in the world that wrong people in their roles as knowers. Testimonial injustice transpires when a hearer's prejudice casts doubt on the credibility of a speaker's word, whereas hermeneutical injustice occurs when a gap in our collective interpretive resources negatively affects a speaker's ability to articulate their experience in a way that is generally understandable. As motherhood is a highly discursively regulated experience (e.g., Hays, 1996), motherhood discourses can be seen to dominate the conversation in ways that can create a gap in the collective interpretive resources, potentially hindering mothers from understanding and articulating their own experiences (cf. Fricker, 2007).

The problem, however, is not merely epistemic. As the narrative theorist Hanna Meretoja (2018, 92) has pointed out, epistemic injustice doesn't only concern information and knowledge but quickly turns into a negotiation about styles of existence — about which ways of being and experiencing are considered worthy. For mothers, who cannot find themselves in the cultural narratives of motherhood, this can mean a denial and disavowal of their own motherhood experience.

In her pioneering study of biographical writing as a mothers' house of language, Eeva Jokinen (1993) has explored diaries as a free and nurturing place for mothers to talk as themselves to themselves as knowing subjects. My study will continue and expand this line of thought by looking into the possibilities of bibliotherapy as a building practice for a broader, louder, more interactional house of language. The excerpts from participants' texts at the beginning of the chapters offer a glimpse into the words and phrases that began to shape the shared linguistic space, while the analysis of the course material will be presented in later articles.

Bibliotherapy and the house of language

> *"What shall others think of you as a mother, if you can't even handle such a simple task — the daycare excursion day."* (Maiden)

Bibliotherapy as a form of language-mediated art therapy offers a variety of possibilities for the construction of a house of language. Therapeutic interaction combined with reading and writing can enhance the participants' awareness of themselves and the world, support their resilience, and enrich the tapestry of their identities, values, and relationships. In a group setting, a space for playful exploration into words, images, ideas, meanings, roles, and positions can be established. In dialogical negotiations of meaning, one's truths catch echoes of other truths and are transformed by them. (Ihanus, 2022, 27–28; 41–45.)

My approach to bibliotherapy is inherently narrative in nature. Rather than delving into the intra-psychic processes, narrative therapies focus on the myriad ways in which the beliefs of the culture influence our lives (Monk, 1997, 27–28). Such a focus can be seen as particularly meaningful in relation to experiences strongly regulated and valued from the outside, such as motherhood.

Serving as the very foundation for the mothers' house of language, I will rely on Hanna Meretoja's (2018, 2019, 2022) theory of narrative agency. Here, narrative agency refers to the ability to use, interpret, and challenge cultural stories and make interpretive and narrative choices related to one's own life and the surrounding world. Research done in metanarrative reading groups, aiming at supporting narrative agency, has found the narrative-centered approach to shared reading to be of importance for shaping and enhancing the narrative agency of the participants. (Meretoja et al., 2022, 391; 410). By applying the theory of narrative agency to the concept of the house of language I will thus center the examination of language mainly on its narrative aspects. My work extends the scope of the research conducted in the metanarrative reading groups (Meretoja et al., 2022; Kinnunen et al., 2024), bringing motherhood as a new focal point into the shared theoretical framework.

In Meretoja's (2022, 391–393) theoretical model, narrative agency is divided into three overlapping components: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. Narrative awareness refers to awareness of culturally available narratives that influence the way people construct their lives, narrative imagination means the ability to creatively engage with

narrative models and to imagine different narrative paths towards the future, and narrative dialogicality refers to the ability to enter into a dialogue with others and their stories with respect for the singularity of their experiences. (See also Kinnunen et al., 2024, 4–5.) As an addition to narrative agency, I outline the concept of *discursive self-defence*, referring more narrowly to an individual's ability to filter and reject harmful modes of expression.

Building on the three dimensions of narrative agency and the concept of discursive self-defence and working together with the participants of my bibliotherapeutic group for mothers, I aim to sketch possible blueprints for a narrative stronghold against the epistemic and ontological injustice of motherhood. This I view not only as a scholarly or therapeutic endeavour but also as an activistic one. The women's movement of the post-war era criticised mainstream psychology for re-enforcing and perpetuating societal structures harmful for women's mental health and called for a more socially attuned and responsible take on the 'psy' disciplines — an understanding that the psychological was political (Crook, 2018, 1155–1157; 1164). Since then, political awareness seems to have gone out of fashion again, and to me, the activistic approach to therapy research is about putting emphasis back on its vitality to the matters of the mind.

Taking into account, however, that feminism has long since abandoned the strive towards a unanimous subject, and noting that the intensive discourses of motherhood have been recognised as a fundamentally Western middle-class phenomenon (Fox, 2006), it is important to acknowledge the limited nature of my method and the need to further research these questions from the points of view of different groups of mothers.

Building the house

> *"If I could, a moment's peace*
> *for myself to give I would."* (Mustikka)

In the spring of 2024, I crafted, organised, and facilitated a mothers' bibliotherapeutic writing group that met once a week for three months at a local family center in southern Finland.[2] Information about the course was distributed beforehand through advertisements in the family center, local maternity and child health clinics, libraries, and community parks, as well as various neighbourhood and family groups on social media.

The duration of the group sessions, held after office hours, was one and a half hours, except for the two-and-a-half-hour Socratic dialogue. The sessions were purposefully designed compact in order to enable also mothers with young children to find childcare and attend. By expecting the mothers to turn up without their children, I wanted to give them a concrete breather from their role as caregivers and thus allow them space for bibliotherapeutic self-reflection.

[2] In the spirit of critical and participatory feminist research tradition, the participants were also given the opportunity to attend a research analysis workshop six months after the course. As a separate part of the working method, the experiences and findings of the analysis workshop will not be discussed here but explored in my dissertation as an addition to the methodology of both research and therapy practice.

The sessions consisted of bibliotherapeutically facilitated writing and discussing assignments[3], inspired by the three dimensions of narrative agency, narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality, outlined by Meretoja (2022) and described above. Accordingly, the bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model was constructed around three key components: narrative workshop, retrospective futuring, and a combination of dialogical working methods consisting of dialogical diary and my own bibliotherapeutic application of a Socratic dialogue (see Table 1).

Working method	**Theoretical perspective**	**Practice**	**Functions**
Narrative workshop	Narrative awareness	Homework + workshop	Deconstruction and reorganisation of motherhood narratives deemed problematic
Retrospective futuring	Narrative imagination	Recurring writing assignment, completed at three different occasions, once in the beginning, once in the middle and once at the end of the course	Construction of a subjective future ideal of motherhood as a personal and societal role and reflection of the steps needed in order for this ideal to have become reality
Dialogical diaries; Socratic dialogue	Narrative dialogicality	Shared journaling; a philosophical group discussion	Establishment of unstructured dialogical self-expression and co-authorship; framing of motherhood as a philosophical and existential question not open to answers produced through expert knowledge other than that of the mothers

Table 1. The main working methods of the bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers.

For the narrative workshop, the participants were given a homework assignment to pay attention to different narratives of motherhood, circulating in their narrative environments, and bring into the session a narrative that they found problematic in some way. At the session, the narratives found by the participants were disassembled, and alternatives were created through multiple discussion and writing assignments.

To titillate the mothers' narrative imagination, I constructed a recurring assignment of retrospective futuring. The task was to imagine a subjective ideal of motherhood as a personal and societal role and write about it as if the present from which one was actually writing was already in the past. "Reminiscing" from the future has been used in utopian thinking, a method of

[3] Reading was an integral part of the bibliotherapeutic process, and I used literature as an inspiration for all the different writing and discussing assignments of the course. The inspirational material used to support the writerly method will be discussed in more detail in subsequent articles as well as in my dissertation.

societal imagination. With utopian thinking, it is possible to distinguish new possibilities and systematically yet associatively look for solutions to complex issues (Lakkala, 2017; Eskelinen et al., 2017).

The third and final component of the mothers' bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model was two-fold, consisting of dialogical diaries and a bibliotherapeutic application of Socratic dialogue. Diary writing, when combined with activities such as creative reading and other stimuli, has been found to fulfil the principles of bibliotherapy (Johansson, 1991, 48), but the potential of a dialogically written diary as a part of a bibliotherapeutic course remained to be discovered. Another method of approaching narrative dialogicality was my own bibliotherapeutic application of Socratic dialogue held on a motherhood-related topic of the participants' choosing. Socratic dialogue is a form of philosophical group discussion in which each participant presents their own experience-based perspective on the topic at hand, and over the course of the discussion, a shared view is constructed. (Bolten, 2001; cf. Hankamäki, 2003.)[4] My application of the method relied on a more pronounced interaction of writing and discussing assignments.

The research material consists of the written answers for the course assignments, my research diaries, the participants' questionnaire responses and an audio recording of the Socratic dialogue, which I will analyse using methods of feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (cf. Baxter, 2006, 162; cf. Mills & Mullany, 2011) and narrative agency analysis (Kinnunen et al., 2024, 10). In this article, I will draw on my own research notes and the participants' experiences of the method as expressed in their questionnaire responses and course discussions, referring to the assignment material only insofar as it addresses the question of the method.

Experiences of the construction

> *"One grows/changes to become a legend."* (Neljänlapsenäiti)

In the end, I got to work with one full group of eight mothers, whose circumstances and family situations were profusely varied. Some worked in demanding expert positions in different occupational fields, others dreamt of returning to studying one day. Many had seen the advertisement on social media or in the family center webpage, one had been told about it by a friend and one had been suggested the course by social workers. The youngest of their children was only a few months old, the oldest was completing his military service.

An atmosphere of trust was born during the very first meeting and carried through the entire course — an observation that both the immediate and the subsequent feedback from the participants affirmed.[5] The mothers took on the assignments with curiosity and an open mind but

[4] For the neo-Kantian tradition of philosophical practice that I used as a starting point of my approach see Saran & Neisser, 2004.

[5] I attribute the immediacy of the trust partly to the course principle of open communication. As a part of a feminist research practice it was important for me to share the main concepts and aims of the study with the participants. That said, it was a balancing act to give them enough information for them to understand the basics of the study yet leave them room to interpret the process and draw from it as freely as possible. They knew from early on about the metaphor of a mothers' house of language as

kept a healthy vigilance. They didn't hesitate to challenge me to take a mood card, too, or let me know, with a twinkle in their eye, when I had managed to describe the next physical exercise more like an orgy than a bibliotherapeutic assignment. ~ *Excuse me,* one of them said during the Socratic dialogue, roughly paraphrased, ~ *I know that I represent the 'older mothers' here, but could you please change the 80's on the white board into the millenium? I would like to make very clear I wasn't a mother in the 80's.* Warm humour proved to be an essential thread running through the course, in my interpretation playing a pivotal role in creating an atmosphere of trust between virtual strangers, while also serving to momentarily deconstruct the power difference between me as the facilitator and the participants.

The experiences of the method were varied but promising (see Table 2). The narrative workshop lured out an eclectic mix of narratives in a multitude of forms and produced an even richer array of alternative narratives challenging the expectations behind the originals (see Partanen, in preparation). The retrospective futuring was originally seen as difficult, but, having aired their frustrations, the participants generally started reporting the recurring task as having become easier and new ideas having been introduced into the texts on every rotation (e.g. Partanen & Vigren, in preparation). The dialogical diaries would have worked better on a longer course, where each of the writers could have got more turns to write and more interaction could have been established. What I found interesting, however, was how the participants themselves started taking turns in creating writing assignments for one another, thus taking creative leadership and further deconstructing the course roles. The other working method concerned with narrative dialogicality, the bibliotherapeutic application of Socratic dialogue, proved to be one of the most influential methods on the course and even serve as a discursive turning point, after which a concept of "a motherhood of one's own" emerged as a shared goal (see Partanen, in preparation).

Working method	**Functions**	**Outcomes**
Narrative workshop	Deconstruction and reorganisation of motherhood narratives deemed problematic	The refusal of expectations behind the narratives deemed problematic
Retrospective futuring	Construction of a subjective future ideal of motherhood as a personal and societal role and reflection of the steps needed in order for this ideal to have become reality	The hermeneutical cycle of new images and meanings created in the process of repeatedly imaging future motherhood
Dialogical diaries; Socratic dialogue	Establishment of unstructured dialogical self-expression and co-authorship; framing of motherhood as a philosophical and existential question not open to answers produced through expert knowledge other than that of the mothers	Deconstruction of course roles, activation of the participants' own creative leadership and a discursive turn towards a "motherhood of one's own"

Table 2. The main working methods and outcomes of the bibliotherapeutic narrative agency support model for mothers.

well as the theoretical concepts of narrative agency, but I refrained from exhaustive expert definitions. This also served the purpose of leaving space for the study to take unexpected turns and allowing myself as a researcher to be surprised about the outcomes.

The feedback about the method and the overall experience was overwhelmingly positive. Out of all the different elements of the course mentioned as important in the feedback, three emerged as the most focal:

- the community of mothers from different walks of life and with children of various ages, allowing for peer support as well as completely different perspectives on mothering
- the feeling of one's thoughts and experiences mattering and the time and space to express them
- the opportunity to write.

What was of specific interest to me was the significance the participants placed on the course regarding their understanding of the expectations and narratives of motherhood. One of the participants wrote as follows: "In the wake of the coursework, I am beginning to practice recognising external and internal expectations better. On the other hand, coursework has given me self-confidence to refuse external expectations." Another wrote: " — It was important to realise, that all mothers ponder very similar things. That many thoughts and expectations come from outside and mothers are very sensitive to detecting them."

The inspection round

> Miiru: *"And like… maybe one can raise children in many different ways so that they turn out good people…"*
> Kanerva: *"And what is a good person anyway…"*

Working with the group of mothers and looking into the materials they produced, it was instantly clear to me, that if narrative agency could be conflated with narrative abilities, there would be nothing to strengthen. The participants were quick thinkers, incredible conversationalists, and imaginative writers, fully able to express a multitude of feelings and experiences in a witty, eloquent, and heartfelt manner.

What became just as clear to me, however, was what they possessed in abilities they lacked in opportunities: the actual space, the cultural permission and the community to safely push the limits of what can be said and thought. The lack of space and permission was demonstrated in a multitude of discussions and writings, touching on all the mothering decisions made solely to avoid judgment and all the masks worn to hide perceived flaws and difficulties. With all the neighbours gathering at their windows to wonder why somebody would be out with their kids at such a late hour, all the social media followers wondering where the children are in these holiday pictures and all the surprise guests forcing the mothers to abruptly turn off the tv, the agential wiggle room of motherhood started to appear rather fleeting and the need to create discursive and narrative spaces for it all the more pressing.

The outlook on a mothers' house of language as a permissive cultural space for linguistic exploration sheds light on the relationship between the concepts of narrative agency and discursive self-defence. In narrative agency, the focus lies in the ability to use, interpret, and challenge cultural stories (Meretoja, 2022, 391–393), and according to my interpretation, the need for narrative agency is fundamental and concerns any narrative environment. Discursive self-defence, on the other hand, can be seen as a concrete set of skills and conditions required to reject external or internalised harmful discursive phenomena, and it is particularly useful when working with groups battling different forms of epistemic injustice. In this way, discursive self-defence can be understood as a pre-requisite for narrative agency specifically relevant to hostile narrative environments, such as the one surrounding motherhood. Without the ability to distinguish and critically assess harmful narratives and defend oneself against them through continuously training one's consciousness to refuse to internalise the expectations they carry, it is difficult to sustain a more active agency needed in dreaming, articulating and crafting a motherhood of one's own.

What was particularly noteworthy in the research material and course feedback, was how self-defence started growing into a kind of *selves-defence*. The strengthened commitment to "a motherhood of one's own", repeatedly expressed through the feedback, didn't only concern the participants themselves but included all mothers around them, weaving a web of solidarity around a universally understood collective of "mothers". In response to the question of whether the participants had been surprised by the course or had surprised themselves in some way, one of the participants wrote: "I realised that I myself sometimes fall into the habit of repeating the myth of motherhood or questioning others' ways of doing things. But now I ALWAYS remember to first take a pause and think about how everyone is the best expert in their own motherhood." Another one answered a question about the key takeaways of the course: " – I notice, that I read the news more critically now and try to recognise e.g. external expectations placed on mothers. I also give more room in my thinking to everyone's individual way of mothering."

In the end, the discursive shelter we were building turned out to be a shelter not only for an individual or a group against harmful external and internalised expectations but also a shelter for other people from the harmful expectations of the shelter builders themselves. In this manner, the course seemed to function as a type of *socio-education*. Psycho-education has long been an important part of therapeutic practices, aiming at educating the participants about the psychological issues and conditions relevant to their wellbeing. Based on my research as a part of a long line of narrative approaches, at least as much emphasis should be put on addressing our cultural realities, their profound influence on us, and our own responsibilities in either perpetuating or renouncing them. For the socio-educative take on preventive therapy practices to grow, we need new, highly specialised, and sharply focused research and therapy approaches addressing not only the epistemic injustice facing the groups and individuals we work with but also their cultural and societal accountabilities as co-creators of our shared narrative environments. How could there, after all, be agency without accountability and vice versa?

Revisiting my research, I would first and foremost reconsider the questions of inclusivity. For a research and therapy practice to aim for activism, it should, when possible, try and tackle not only the broader epistemic and ontological injustice but also the concrete everyday obstacles of participation. This could mean anything from arranged child-care to planning the courses together with the participants to optimally design both the themes and the details like session length, frequency, and meeting time to best serve them. These practices could provide a more holistic, action-research-inspired approach to building not only the research and the methodology but also the community and enable mothers from more diverse backgrounds and situations to join in.

Inclusion, however, should not be understood simplistically or strived at automatically. As the expectations and discourses around motherhood are known to be emphatically culture- and class-determined (see O'Reilly 2020, 25–26), no one method or practice has a chance to cater for the many different needs of mothers from various class, race, and culture backgrounds. In my experience, bibliotherapy as a practice also tends to draw in well-educated middle-class women to whom writing is an accessible and natural method of self-expression. This makes my approach very much a partial one, possibly in both senses of the word, but, arguably, the partiality need not be as much of an issue as it may first seem. For the comparative literature and feminist utopian researcher Angelika Bammer (1991), the very strength of a vision lies in its partiality, as we often see more clearly the closer we look (ibid., 4).

As a firm believer in situated knowledges (see Haraway, 1988), I would suggest that my being a part of the group I'm researching has been of fundamental importance for my ability to craft a method specifically designed to cater to them. If my work can then function as an inspiration or a point of militant divergence for a researcher or a practitioner working with another very specific group of mothers, all the better. There is also a keen need for creating communities and practices aimed at bringing together mothers from fundamentally different mothering cultures, and I would warmly welcome the opportunity to collaborate on such a project.

Conclusions

> *"Becoming a mother is a kind of a lie — it's still you."* (loputon)

According to Judith Butler (2006, 241), there is no way out of the compulsion to repeat cultural meanings. Yet, one can repeat differently, and agency specifically resides in the possibility of variation found in repetition. In the light of my research, I have come to perceive the mothers' house of language from a Butlerian perspective, as a space, permission, and a means to occasionally, for a fleeting moment, repeat differently — seeking and seizing discursive ruptures, varying discourses, and reaching towards one's own voice without the fear of cultural punishment. In this way, the house can be seen to function as a stronghold of discursive self-defence, offering a safe place to let the more active narrative agency to flourish and grow.

Another key realisation of the study concerns the place of non-clinical preventive art therapeutic practices at the intersection of therapy, pedagogy and activism. Having incessantly reflected on my position as a therapeutic practice planner and facilitator as well as participant-observer and analyst of the research, I have come to the conclusion that when working with groups suffering from epistemic injustice and leading a narratively challenged existence, we as researchers and as therapy professionals do not only have the license but the ethical duty to refrain from the classic attempts at "neutrality". As therapy always serves and enhances a certain set of values and a certain system of thinking, instead of feigning neutrality it should strive towards actively acknowledging, reflecting, embracing, and communicating the values and intentions behind the practice.

In this manner, therapy research has a lot to learn from action research that openly addresses a societal problem, sets a target and instead of just researching, aims at fixing it. The same goes for therapy without the research, and this, I argue, has monumental consequences on how we look at agency, too. Understood this way, therapy views the participant as an agent of their own growth but also as an agent of a systemic change — a revolutionary agent, if you will — whose hope, a key concept in bibliotherapy, is no longer therapeutically private but instead societally re-collectivised (see also Eskelinen et al., 2020, 49) for the good of the community. For what is the value of agency if it only extends to ourselves and not to the world we inhabit?

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Biblio/poetry therapy with other expressive art therapies in overcoming existential crisis

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Abstract

The existential crisis has accompanied mankind since its beginnings, especially in the present day, in which the question of the meaning and quality of existence is becoming increasingly pressing, both on an individual and social level. Although the term crisis implies a state of dissatisfaction and distress along with associated emotions such as fear, uncertainty, sadness, hopelessness, etc., this state can also be a motivator for a change of perspective and taking a proactive role in one's own life. In this sense, bibliotherapy or poetry therapy can play an auxiliary role, as they indirectly encourage creativity, imagination, insight and consideration of possible goals and coping strategies for unfavourable life situations. To promote sensitivity, motivation, and an easier interpretation of personal experiences, especially for people with difficulties in verbal communication, the literary text can be used in combination with some other artistic media such as music, sound, movement, dance, drawing, painting, modelling, etc. In this case, it is a kind of a multimodal expressive arts therapy in which different art forms are integrated into a therapeutic relationship. As bibliotherapy and poetry therapy have a large number of contents and themes that can be processed, the other arts make it possible to support affective charging, personal analysis, and cognitive elaboration. In this sense, existing and evolving future multimodal approaches should be considered that incorporate literary texts in combination with some other artistic media in the context of coping with an existential crisis caused by various psychosocial, health and/or socio-global challenges.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, poetry therapy, expressive art therapies, existential crisis, integrative multimodal approach, creativity, well-being

Introduction

An existential crisis is often triggered by a significant event in a person's life, such as a psychological or physical trauma, separation, a loss, the death of a loved one, reaching a significant age, an illness, unrealistic expectations, poverty, etc., and it is usually connected with deep questioning and reflection about the fundamental nature of one’s life, meaning and purpose (Andrews, 2016; Negoiță, 2021). The existential crisis has accompanied mankind since its beginnings, especially in modern times, when the question of the meaning and quality of existence is becoming more and more pressing, both on an individual and societal level (Kissane, 2012). Unfavourable outcomes of such a state are personal dissatisfaction and despair, as well as related emotions such as fear, insecurity, sadness, shame, hopelessness, etc. In such a state, people explore and use various ways to help themselves and cope with the undesirable consequences of an existential crisis. Some of them are inappropriate such as substance abuse,

avoidance, self-harm, violence, isolation, negative self-talk and others (Butėnaitė et al., 2016; Senkevich, 2016).

In contrast to these maladaptive behaviours, people throughout history have also resorted to positive coping strategies found within religion, philosophy, spirituality, psychology, safe-care and self-help approaches and, of course, art (Kim et al., 2014; Sakai et al., 2019). Namely, the use of sounds, movements, colors, images, words, symbols and metaphors represent primary forms of communication and ways of exploring oneself and the world around us, both on a historical-cultural and ontological level. Experiences induced by art reveal that sensory perception is often accompanied by a strong emotional response that goes beyond everyday awareness and reality. This not only provides immediate pleasure, but also encourages emotional reorganization. In addition, a work of art can revive emotions from previous positive existential experiences and thus mitigate the intensity of current unfavourable situations. By interweaving various experiences, art contributes to emotional integrity and life satisfaction but also fosters transcendence, creativity and reflection, which can lead to appropriate existential choices and existential well-being (Asakavičiūtė, 2018; Funch, 2021). This highlights not only the aesthetic value but also the effective and therapeutic significance of artistic media, forming the foundation for the development and practice of expressive art therapies.

Expressive art therapies

The therapeutic role of artistic media began to be observed early in the development of human civilization, especially in the context of magical rituals, ceremonies, and religious practices. Throughout history, various artists, philosophers, and physicians have explored the use of art in healing and have found that various artistic forms can serve as a means of emotional catharsis, encouragement, soothing of the soul, as well as an aid in the treatment of various illnesses. The development of scientific methodology and the collaboration of professionals from different disciplines have led to increased practical application and scientific research aimed at defining appropriate theoretical frameworks and intervention techniques, as well as assessment tools in this field (Hinz, 2020; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). In addition, numerous international associations were founded in the mid-20th century to provide a global forum for dialogue, professional development, the establishment of contemporary principles within psychotherapeutic practice, and the promotion of the use of artistic media to support mental, physical, and spiritual health. At its core, this approach integrates three fundamental concepts: symbol, imagination and creativity (Bridges, 2022). A symbol, whether mythic, artistic, religious or abstract, has the ability to unite unconscious and conscious contents as well as instinctual and spiritual forces. The experience of symbols is imbued with affectivity and dynamism, and the interpretation of their multi-layered dimensions is tied to the process of imagination. In therapeutic contexts, creative imagination facilitates the formation of new connections and relationships to the traces of experiences that begin to overwhelm and impede desirable life responses. In this context, emphasis is placed on the process of creativity, not only in the productive and operational sense, but also in the area of discovering new insights directed to problem solving (Rahman et al., 2024).

Engaging with artistic media and personal creative ideas fosters a sense of control over circumstances and situations. Similarly, participation in group activities helps to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation, while also enhancing social interactions. Moreover,

tailoring therapeutic session techniques and structures to align with a client's preferences and needs can further enhance relaxation, satisfaction, and acceptance (Williams, 2022).

In light of these observations and the findings of previous research, expressive art-therapies emerge as a valuable diagnostic and therapeutic approach for addressing existential crises. Through the reception, creation, or interpretation of work of art, these therapies may help to evoke or elaborate various aspects of traumatic experiences especially in situations when verbal communication is limited or unfeasible.

According to the *National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Associations* (NCCATA), various therapeutic approaches can be explored within the following disciplines: art therapy, music therapy, dance movement therapy, drama therapy, and poetry/bibliotherapy (Miholić & Martinec, 2013). Each of these disciplines has its own set of professional standards and required qualifications.

Art therapy (AT) is a form of psychotherapy that uses the creative art process (drawing, painting, and modeling) as a means of expression and communication. *The American Art Therapy Association* (AATA) defines AT as the therapeutic use of artistic expression, visual media, and the creative process, where the client's response to the artwork created or perceived is viewed as a reflection of his or her personal development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicted relationships (Miholić & Martinec, 2013). Jung created an appropriate theoretical framework for this therapeutic approach, seeing the goal of therapy as the release of creative forces that become catalysts for change (Borowsky Junge, 2016). Margaret Naumburg, one of the pioneers of AT, recognized that thoughts and feelings that emerge from the unconscious and preconscious can be expressed through images long before than by verbalizationthan. In that case, better understanding of induced experience can be encouraged by adding a story, description or meaning to own or perceived artwork (Ivanović et al., 2014). In the frame of therapy process a wide range of themes can be used to address various emotional, cognitive and social dimensions of the individual. The choice of theme, technique, and materials for artistic expression depends on the dominant issues of the traumatic experience or the individual's desire to process specific areas that are unresolved or distressing.

Music therapy (MT) is also a valuable discipline which, according to the World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT), is defined as a form of intervention that improves the physical, psychological, social, communicative, cognitive and spiritual dimensions of a person through the use of music and its elements (tone, rhythm, tempo, melody, harmony, etc.). MT includes a wide range of interventions, e.g. receptive music listening, imitation, musical improvisation, singing, rhythmic activities, combination of music and guided imagination, composing, etc. (Rolvsjord & Stige, 2015). In the context of MT, listening or playing a musical structure affects the psychophysiological functions as wel as processes of introspection and emotional expression. The use of music in therapeutic conditions can also provide a suptile possibilities for transformation of anger, aggression and sadness through imagination, aesthetic experience and self-expression in the process of experimentation and play (Montelo & Coons, 1998). Music has a direct effect on neurological system that leads to changes in bodily responses that are under the influence of the autonomic nervous system. In this sense, music can have a stimulating or relaxing effect. As music is a non-figurative form of artistic expression, it allows free associations and freedom of expression. Likewise, due to its meditative character, music is often used as an additional stimulating and supportive tool when using other artistic media.

Dance movement therapy (DMT) involves the use and analysis of various aspects of bodily experience and body expression such as movement, facial expressions, gestures, touch, posture, etc. Similar to other body-oriented psychotherapies, DMT is based on the assumption that body movements reflect the emotional state of the individual and that changes in movement patterns lead to changes in psychosocial experience (Lauffenburger, 2020). Since the body is the dominant medium in this therapeutic approach, its application can influence the perception of physiological sensations, the bodily expression of emotional states, the expression of unconscious impulses, the creation of new behavioral strategies through the discovery of new movement patterns and qualities, and the integration of physical, cognitive and emotional aspects of functioning (Martinec, 2013). During therapy process various specific techniques such as imitation, mirroring, body symbolization, exploring through movement, authentic movement and others can be combined (Martinec, 2013; Tortora, 2019). DMT can also take into account different variables that are not in the focus in other therapies such as changes in movement quality, personal movement patterns, using of space, kinesphere, kinaesthetic empathy, etc., in relation with emotional, physical and symbolic experiences.

Drama therapy is the intentional use of dramatic and/or theatrical processes to achieve therapeutic goals. Under the safe conditions of the therapeutic milieu, creative dramatization and role-playing encourage experimentation and trying out different roles, rejecting, correcting and changing these roles without long-term commitments and consequences (Jennings et al., 2005). The most important process in the application of drama is creative dramatization, which aims to increase self-awareness, body-awareness, imagination, and understanding of social interaction. The use of DT is based on a prepared literary text (e.g. story, drama, game show, fairy tale, myth) in a way to be used: a) the original dramatic text, b) the adaptation of a prose text into a dramatic text, c) creating one's own text by an individual or a group, d) improvisation based on the theme of the dramatic template that was previously used. Various media can also be used in the therapeutic process, such as puppets, associations, pantomime, costuming, writing, voice variations, drawing, body movements, etc. (Behera et al., 2020).

Bibliotherapy is the intentional use of literary texts—such as prose, poetry, fairy tales, myths, and legends—and literary devices, including metaphor, simile, allegory, rhyme, and rhythm, in therapy, education, and rehabilitation. The goal is to evaluate and address various emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal issues across individuals of all ages (Kortner-Aiex, 1993). A literary text uniquely combines form (*lexis*) and content (*logos*)—structure and meaning, experience and expression—and serves as a reflection of the value system within a specific socio-cultural context. As such, literary texts act as integrated stimuli that evoke diverse psychological responses in individuals, including identification, projection, introjection, catharsis, and insight. Insight, in particular, is a cornerstone of the therapeutic process. Its value lies in enabling readers to observe and reflect on their own reactions to a text, thereby fostering awareness of their problems, which helps in resolving them and preparing for future life challenges.Insight represents a critical self-examination facilitated by the text, through which individuals deeply assess and evaluate their own attitudes and actions (Peterkin & Grewal, 2018; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019). In bibliotherapy, additional techniques such as journaling, creating memory books, life maps, time capsules, videography, and comics can also be used. It also can assist in deconstructing problems and constructing unique, personalized solutions for the client and others involved in the problem situation.

Finally, expressive art therapies can also be considered as an "integrative approach", i.e. a "multimodal approach" that combines two or more artistic media to promote the perception of

different life situations, emotional maturation and interpersonal relationships (Malchiodi & Ginns-Guenberg, 2012). The choice of therapeutic approach or their combination depends on the defined problem area, the client's preferences and motivation and the goal of the therapy program. Aesthetic criteria and the person's intrinsic sensory receptivity should also be taken into account when selecting the content and protocol of each individual therapy session. This means that a person's conscious and latent tendencies to receive and send messages through a particular artistic medium must be recognized. In addition, other related and complementary approaches and techniques may be used, such as progressive psychophysical relaxation, breathing exercises, guided imagination, touch, massage, aromatherapy, etc, to promote giving in therapy and support the body-mind unity.

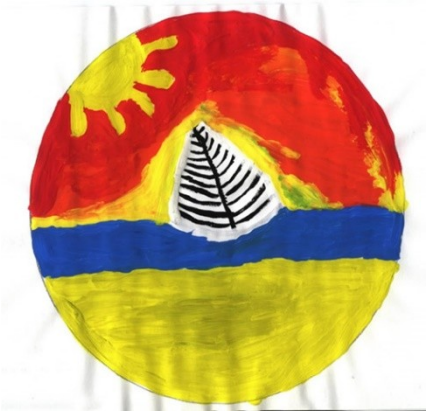
Interplay of biblio/poetry therapy and other expressive arts therapies in overcoming existential crisis

Although an existential crisis often involves feelings of dissatisfaction and despair, it can also serve as a catalyst for shifting perspectives and adopting a more proactive approach to our lives. In this context, bibliotherapy or poetry therapy can provide valuable support by indirectly fostering creativity, imagination, self-awareness, and reflection on potential goals and coping strategies for challenging life situations. To enhance sensitivity, motivation, and the interpretation of personal experiences, these approaches can be effectively combined with other artistic media (Dunn-Snow, 1997; De Vries et al., 2017).

For example, various scientific studies have investigated the effectiveness of using different types of literary texts in combination with art therapy. Some of them have shown that the combination of these two approaches is beneficial for grieving children with limited developmental capacity for expressing difficult emotions (Ridley & Frache, 2020, Robinson, 2022). In this context, the combined use of bibliotherapy and art therapy can be of great benefit as it utilises aesthetic distance to help clients identify and process the emotions they resonate with during the grieving process. This approach allows clients to externalise their feelings, whether through their own creative work or through a character in a story they have read (Hunt, 2006). Some other authors (Malchiodi & Ginns-Guenberg, 2008; Leggett, 2009) recommend a wide range of books, such as The Way I Fell (Cain, 2000), which illustrate children experience a variety of emotions. They can help the child learn about the common language and experiences that each emotion evokes, which can lead to a dialogue about feelings. During the therapy process, children can also be encouraged to draw different themes related to their experiences, helping them to understand their emotions and how certain situations affect them. Creating scrapbooks, puppets, collages, mobiles or images from photographs can also be used to process the main elements of the story. Interpretations and discussions about a work of art can be carried out by exploring meaning and metaphor of each line, point, colour, and image. Interpretations can be done in collaboration with the child by asking questions to help the children with self-awareness. The questions also help them to draw conclusions about what they have drawn and how it relates to their personal experiences.

In a study conducted in the paediatric oncology department, the use of fairy tales, storytelling and patients' own stories, together with art expression, has shown that drawing and painting contain concrete and projective elements that convey the interpretation of objects, feelings, experiences, actions and ideas (Miholić, 2012). Figure 1, for example, shows a painted mandala of a 14-year-old boy with dg. *osteosarcoma maxillae I. dex*. in which it can be seen that the

existential anxiety is sublimated by the creative act and replaced by a feeling of comfort, lightness and satisfaction.



"*I feel like a light feather carried over miles by a light summer breeze. Perce is in the air, flying between the turquoise sea and the sunset. The sun is setting, and the colors of the sunset are beautiful.*

I feel like I'm walking on a long sandy beach, swimming in the sea and watching the beautiful sunset against the colorful sky"

Figure 1. Visual metaphor induced by a literary text

According to Hinz (2020), several important conceptual consensus points have emerged in research on the integrative use of art therapy and bibliotherapy. One of these is the reflective distance and mediators in art therapy, which give the client space for indirect processing, and without which the experience is likely to be too immediate and absorbing to allow contemplation. In bibliotherapy, the reading material is the intermediary object that can create the client a sense of a safe distance for the client because the issue is not yet being confronted with the subject. Another important point of conceptual consensus is the state of "flow" or increased focus of attention, the loss of a sense of time, the feeling of satisfaction and great joy when clients can master a situation that was previously a challenge.

A combination of bibliotherapy and music is also being examined. One of the possibilities is the intersections between bibliotherapy and *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL). As Watts and Piña (2023) point out, many music educators already incorporate children's literature into their lessons, and bibliotherapy offers the opportunity to enrich these activities with greater depth and intentionality. Practical strategies should follow some recommendations for specific books aligned with the five components of the SEL framework: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Having in mind well-being in college students' population, Yücesan and Şendurur (2017) provided an integrative program with music therapy, poetry therapy and creative drama. They found that the program had a positive impact on general self-esteem, social self-esteem, academic self-esteem and parental self-esteem compared to a control group of students. Also, Glassman (1991) described very complex changes in a girl with a brain injury who had very powerful reaction to different song lyrics while participating in a music therapy group. Identification with various song lyrics stimulated discussion and enabled her to express her feelings of anger and frustration and the problems she was struggling with. Another important change was that she became less self-centered, demanding and manipulative, more aware of the external environment, more cooperative and accepting of problems beyond her control. She also managed to find out a new willingness to deal with other circumstances and a strong desire to find direction and meaning in her life. Similarly, Gladding and Mazza (1983) described that the use of poetry and/or popular music, as helpful adjunctive techniques in group counseling, can facilitate the group process by

providing a non-threatening means for expression. The lyrical expressions of songs can evoke feelings in clients in relation to current conflicts. In a frame of group setting, this can provide validation or universalization of feelings as well as a springboard for group discussion.

Storytelling refers to the skill of telling stories, drawing attention to different senses, imagination and emotional responses (Gupta and Jha, 2022). It also stimulates neurological activation. Namely, Stephens, Silbert and Hasson (2010) found that listening to stories activates mirror neurons, with the listener mirroring the brain activity of the storyteller and the kinaesthetic activity of the characters, which can also help stimulate empathy. In addition, storytelling activates cortical, parietal, subcortical and frontal parts of the brain, leading to more successful interpretation, retention and recall of complex concepts and abstract ideas (Gupta and Jha, 2022). However, storytelling is not only about listening to stories, but also about the creation and telling of stories by the participants of the therapy program, which can be stimulated in various ways. In this sense, an interesting method can be *kamishibai* (jap. kah-mee-shee-bye), a traditional Japanese method of storytelling that uses illustrated cards placed in a small framed wooden box called *butai* (Marciniak and Dobińska, 2023). It has almost the same elements as traditional theatre as it contains characters and narratives; however, unlike traditional theatre, the performance is presented with images, voice and sound effects produced by the narrator or musical instruments (Aerila et al., 2022). Vojnović (2024), for example, attempted to assess the value of using this technique in working with children with developmental disabilities on a group of 6 children aged 9 to 11 years with autism spectrum disorders or ADHD. The study participants were encouraged to tell their own stories by sequencing sentences, using the story "*Dinki*" based on the story of the "*Ugly duckling*", inserting pictures into the *kamishibai* frame, using musical instruments, and adding facial expressions and gestures. The results showed that the combination of the above techniques had a positive effect on promoting assertiveness, self-expression, group cohesion and cooperation in the children who participated in this therapeutic program.

Drama therapy uses scripts, stories, and myths to evoke and explore themes or archetypal material. In this context, the literary text serves as a stimulus for performing improvised or scripted roles, embodying characters, or portraying oneself within a fictional reality. This interplay creates a strong foundation for bridging drama therapy and bibliotherapy in therapeutic practices. Research in this area supports the thesis that the collaboration of these two approaches can contribute to a better understanding of oneself and social relationships in different life situations. For example, Jacobs (2005) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of dramatic arts combined with bibliotherapy as part of the Drama Discovery curriculum in a middle school class of eleven students with emotional/behavioural disabilities and one student with delinquent behaviours. She noticed that students with emotional/behavioural disabilities often have low self-efficacy when it comes to explaining their own disabilities, coping with the label of having a disability, and managing the general issues that come with having a disability. The most important factor explored in the qualitative study was whether students' self-efficacy in relation to their own emotional disability can be influenced by reading and acting out characters with similar problems. The data collection method for this qualitative study included observations, field notes, tape recordings, student journals, and interviews. The author wrote a pre-conceptual map to initiate the study. The results confirmed the author's hypothesis and showed a positive effect of the implemented curriculum on students' self-efficacy in understanding and coping with their emotional disabilities as well as their own exceptionality. Regarding the educational environment, Başarı and Ayhan (2021), based on a synthesis of various research, conclude that certain studies have shown the significant impact of integrating

creative drama and bibliotherapy techniques in education. These studies highlight the importance of these methods in helping individuals to discover themselves, gain insights and explore previously unrecognized aspects of their identity. In particular, creative drama and bibliotherapy have been observed to enhance individuals' decision-making and problem-solving abilities throughout their educational journey. In addition, these techniques play a crucial role in developing students' social-emotional skills and promote effective communication. Creative drama and bibliotherapy have proven to be particularly effective in cultivating empathy among students, further enhancing their value in educational contexts.

In the frame of drama therapy and bibliotherapy body, puppets, mask, costuming and (panto)mime also can be used. In that context some picture books are recommended such as *"Dear Pritni, come to me sometime"* as an example of combining drama, literary art and bibliotherapy in early childhood education focused on emotional expressions and emotion regulation skills in day care. Emotion-related actions in various learning situations are explored using a pony hand puppet named Pritney. Eight distinct themes serve as entry points for examining how a pedagogical hand puppet and a bibliotherapeutic approach can support a child's growth and development in various daycare scenarios. Focus is also on fostering socioemotional skills such as: 1) self-knowledge and self-awareness, 2) self-regulation, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship skills and 5) responsible decision-making. In addition, this book offers some ideas how children's literature can facilitate discussions on challenging topics, such as grief and death (Suvilehto, 2020).

On the same assumption one more study was carried out regarding coping with malignant diseases in children (Miholić, 2012). For research purpose a therapy program was carried out with the using of storytelling, role-playing, drawings and puppets made by children on childhood oncology unit. Figure 2 shows some artworks by an 8-year-old boy who with dg. osteosarcoma femoris lat., which deals with the theme of friendship. After reading a story about two friends, he made a puppet and described it as funny, cheerful and with a hobby of table tennis, which it would play when he leaves the hospital. By naming the puppet after himself, he identified with her and placed her in an imaginary world of sport, victory, friendship and fun, anticipating a positive future after hospitalization.

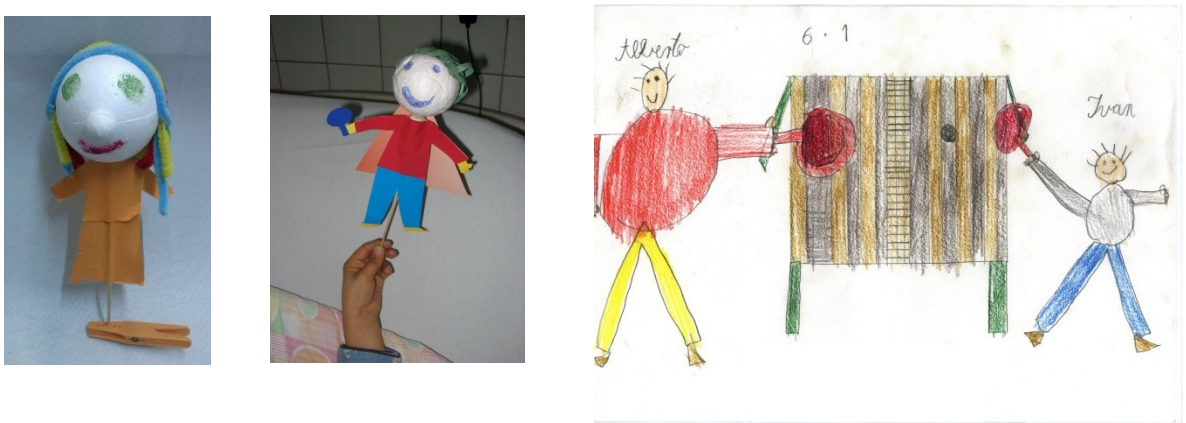


Figure 2. Child's artwork induced by integrative expressive art-therapies program

The body, movement and dance can also be used as part of different multimodal approaches. For example, we can cite the picture book "*Telling stories – creating stories*" (Velički, 2013) in which the literary text and the pictorial representation encourage identification, the imagination

of a drawn figure and the physical imitation or mirroring of a perceived animal (Figure 3). This can only be the beginning for the further processing of the personal state and feelings, as a trigger for the development of further personal stories in which the child moves away from the depicted figure and embarks on its own journey in which it explores its bodily experiences, the emotions located in the body, the causes of its feelings and ways of better adapting to the situations surrounding it.

The elephant is big and heavy. He won't stand anymore either. He lay down, tired, everyone could see that. 	**The owl** opened its eyes, it's time to get up. She flies through the cold night, everyone could see that. 

Figure 3. Excerpt from the picture book "Telling stories - creating stories"

The results of the various research confirm that various pieces of art can be combined, which promotes their synergetic effect. The similarity or difference of artistic media strengthens the flow of new associations, ideas and memories. Their regulating effect is supported by the collaboration of therapist and client in a therapeutic alliance in which the therapist is given the unique privilege of being with his client in one of the most meaningful experiences that person will ever have (Bugental, 1965). The therapist who approaches his role in this work with genuine humility and respect for the individuality of his client will ensure that he does nothing to contaminate or interfere with his patient's experience and processing of the existential crisis. When the power and richness of artistic media are additionally utilized in the therapeutic process, an adaptive response to each challenge can promote equanimity, peace, and fulfilment, while a sustained engagement with life, creativity, and joy can be additionally encouraged (Kissane, 2012). To enhance the combination of bibliotherapy and poetry therapy with other areas of expressive art-therapies in overcoming existential crisis, some guidelines can be suggested, such as that the therapeutic process should be tailored to the client's age, abilities, and personal preferences. For example, when working with children, the use of puppets, drawing, storytelling, and body expression can support emotional understanding and regulation. Also, clients should be encouraged to interpret both read and created content through guided reflection (e.g., by asking questions about the meaning of characters, content, or actions) to connect artistic expression with personal experiences. Finally, therapy should enable clients to create, write and/or verbally express their own stories to promote coherence, control and meaning, especially in the face of life crises.

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy and poetry therapy encompass a wide range of content and themes, offering opportunities for profound exploration. Complementary art forms enhance these approaches by

supporting emotional expression, personal reflection, and cognitive processing. The use of various artistic media creates a safe space for expressing and processing inner experiences, while their integration stimulates creativity, a sense of belonging, and the development of a positive self-image. The therapeutic potential lies in the symbolic and multilayered nature of art, which enables the creation of meaning and the reshaping of personal perspectives and life stories. In this context, existing and emerging multimodal approaches should be considered, integrating literary texts with other artistic media to address existential crises stemming from various psychosocial, health-related, and global socio-economic challenges.

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