

A poem a day keeps the doctor away

Author of the Week: Belgium

Bibliotherapy in Flanders

[by Jürgen Pieters](#)

*'I would not claim that Keats can set a smashed collarbone,
or that Edna St. Vincent Millay is sovereign for lumbago.
But in the less material sphere of the mental and the spiritual,
poetry can help far worse ills than these, although its action
may prove somewhat more indirect,
subtle and deferred than the patient expects.'*

(Robert Haven Schauffler, *The Poetry Cure*, 1928)

In the hearts and minds of some, a good poem is like an apple or even a glass of wine. A poem a day keeps the doctor away - or so these poem-lovers say. Their conviction goes back a long way. For the Ancient Greeks, the god of medicine, Apollo, was also the god of poetry. To this day, literary enthusiasts who are eager to make claims about the curative potential of poems or novels like to point out this significant historical fact. *Katharsis*, Aristotle's famous term for the prime effect of good literature, is originally a medical concept, pointing to the purgation of bodily fluids and other substances. After Aristotle redefined it in the *Poetics*, it came to be associated with the restoration of well-being.

Of course, even in Antiquity, the idea that literature was good for you was not beyond dispute. Socrates's famous indictment of poetry in Plato's *Republic* - an unequivocal call to banish the poets from what the philosopher considered to be the ideal state - rests on the same analogy, albeit *ex negativo*. For Plato, Aristotle's teacher, the comparison between the 'arts' of poetry and medicine could only work to the detriment of the former. Plato's logic in *The Republic* is crystal clear: if we continue to claim for our poets the powers of healing, as Socrates suggests, we will only become sicker.

As Thomas Laqueur and Leah Price, among others, have shown, the idea that reading literature could actually be bad for readers became a specific topic of worry and debate in the second half of the 19th century, as the literary market began to grow exponentially and especially young female readers - the likes of Emma Bovary - became increasingly subjected to the fantasies they found in cheap novels. Reading of that sort resulted in self-absorption, numerous critics argued, making use of ideas that seemed to come straight out of Plato. The danger was that these impressionable readers would identify with what they read, they claimed, mistaking fiction for what was real. Given the prominence of bad examples in this fiction, this type of reading - solitary, narcissistic, masturbatory even - would have the inverse effect of the cathartic experience that Aristotle had been holding a plea for. Rather than cure you from indigestion, these novels could give you one. The comfort that they provided was false comfort, as the example of Flaubert's heroine clearly showed.

If today worries about the detrimental effect of reading fiction have largely disappeared, so, unfortunately, has literature's cultural prominence. If Socrates were alive today, his fear of fiction would no doubt have shifted from literature proper to mass-produced film and video productions, social media and graphic novels. Today, the idea that reading literature is good for you, both mentally and physically, hardly ever meets with resistance - scepticism, yes ('literature does not really cure you, does it?'), but not resistance of the sort that seemed prevalent in the later decades of the 19th century.

As the previous century saw the rise and further development of different types of bibliotherapy - medically endorsed, in hospitals and other (mental) health facilities, as well as more informal ones in book clubs and other readers' organisations - the first decades of the 21st century continued to strengthen the practice's institutional basis. The Covid-19 pandemic provided numerous stories and reports of readers who felt uplifted, comforted or otherwise positively impacted by their readings, either solitary or collective. Reading novels and poems, and exchanging thoughts about them, was taken by many as true enhancement of their well-being. Book clubs, meeting over Zoom, flourished.

In Flanders, The Readers' Collective (*Het Lezerscollectief*, founded in 2014) is one of many organisations which in the past decade have promoted the idea that reading literature can be a healing experience. Taking their cue from the British organisation The Reader (founded in 2002), The Readers' Collective introduced a method of Shared Reading in Flanders: groups of eight to twelve participants come together for a two-hour session in which they listen to a short story read out loud by a trained Reader Leader, who at carefully chosen moments invites the participants to respond to elements of the text at hand that spark personal reflection. The collective reading process that follows is not driven by the search for the presumed right interpretation of the text. The text is, in the end, not the actual *objective* of the session, but a *medium* meant to spark up a conversation among the participants, in which the diversity of opinions and memories serves to enrich the reading experience. Key to the entire process is the idea of connection with the text at hand, as Jane Davis, the Reader's founder, puts it in a famous TED talk titled 'Shared Reading Can Help Us Connect'.

Traditionally, Shared Reading sessions end with the reading and discussion of a poem. In the past two years, The Readers' Collective (in collaboration with Poëziecentrum) have brought out two anthologies to sustain and publicise their work. They both contain some thirty poems, mainly but not exclusively by Flemish and Dutch poets. The poems were all suggested by experienced Reader Leaders, which means that the texts at one point proved to 'work' in the actual environment of a Shared Reading group. The poems, the editors of the anthologies are eager to stress, are not 'therapeutic' per se (in terms of content or authorial intention). They are, rather, 'invitations to a conversation, to shared recognition, to consolation'.

While it would require a much closer study of what the poems included in the two anthologies have in common, it soon becomes clear that the texts at hand share a distinct degree of openness and suggestiveness. No truly hermetic poems will be found here, but neither will poems whose meaning can be immediately grasped. The poems included are clearly meant to work for different readers in different ways. This not only accounts for their open suggestiveness but also, probably, for the fact that none of them date from before the 20th century. Poems that contain distinct markers pointing to their historical context tend to steer readers in the direction of the search for that context.

Poems like those - and the same could be said of hermetic poetry - tend to function as puzzles to be solved, and that is not the sort of reading experience the advocates of Shared Reading are after. What they want are poems that readers can make their own, without worries about whether their appropriation of the texts goes against the intentions their authors may have had in writing them.

In the anthologies, the poems' authors are identified, for obvious legal and moral reasons but this is not necessarily the case in the actual Shared Reading sessions. These are not about the celebration of whomever wrote the text but about what the text provokes in its readers - emotions, thoughts, recollections. As Marcel Detienne has made clear, poetry was traditionally seen as the art of memory, with the poet as the one who kept memory alive. For the ancient Greeks, the muses were daughters of the goddess of memory, *Mnèmosunè*. Their importance in the earliest phases of the Western tradition of poetry cannot be underestimated. They ensured that the poet had a special connection with everything that was not visible. They also ensured that what the poet said was true. The ancient Greek word for 'truth' (*aletheia*) literally means 'that which must not be forgotten'.

In the West, poets still ensure the vividness of our memory, on an individual as well as a collective level. They do so not only by *what* they say, but also by *the way in which they say it*, in a language that speaks to us every time we say the poem, even if the poet has been dead for centuries. With carefully selected images and sound patterns, the poet's language makes us think, and therefore remember, permanently. Poetry does wonderful things to people's power of recollection. Several Reader Leaders of the Readers' Collective have observed this effect. Read a poem in a group and the memories arrive. Poems are like flints: put them in friction with a human brain and chances are that the mind will soon ignite.

Poems can also ignite flames in a mind from which the fire seems to have been extinguished for some time. In recent decades, there has been a lot of research into the usefulness of poetry for people who have memory problems. Dementia, in many forms and degrees, is a common condition in the older part of the population, and there are those who suffer from juvenile dementia.

That poetry can do wondrous things to a person's memory even in such cases is equally demonstrated by the practice of The Readers' Collective. The short stories read in their sessions rarely work well for readers with advanced dementia, as short-term memory cannot properly process that much information. Poems have a better effect in these cases, perhaps because they focus more on long-term memory. Does this also have to do with the fact that many elderly people used to have to memorise poems in school?

The second of the two poetry anthologies that the Readers' Collective published resulted from reading sessions with participants suffering from early-stage and advanced dementia. Again, the poems that were selected are not exclusively targeted at this specific audience, even though the number of poems directly addressing or even thematising questions of language, memory, age, loss and vulnerability is markedly higher in this collection than in the previous one.

What the poems in both anthologies share, as the editors stress on both books' back covers, is the search for 'words that can express the unsayable, that which we find hard to discuss'. The comfort that these poems are meant to bring, and often do, follows from the recognition of shared experiences. During a collective reading, we feel

comforted because we feel that our pain is finally being acknowledged, by someone, moreover, who is probably better at expressing what it is that haunts us.

Taken together, the poems included in these two anthologies provide interesting examples of what the Flemish critic Dirk De Schutter has called ‘wound-words’ (‘wondewoorden’) in another, unrelated, publication of Poëziecentrum. The term, taken from Flemish poet Paul Van Ostaijen’s *Bezette Stad* (1921), is especially useful in that it captures what I consider to be the central paradox that underlies bibliotherapy: lest it fall prey to the critique that the literature it prescribes merely holds the promise of a false cure, the novels and poems used by bibliotherapists all over the world will need to refrain from being too idealistic and rosy. But at the same time, they will have to give the targeted users a sufficient amount of hope and, at least to some degree, promise the possibility of resilience. The poems that De Schutter labels as wound-words aim for that precarious balance. In his own words: ‘These poems are born from a wound; not necessarily a special injury or a specific trauma, but the common wound of our human condition, the irreparable vulnerability that is coexistent with what it means to be human. Poems like these have their origin in the unfathomable darkness of the human heart that is lost in itself, mourning in vain the world’s inhospitability and the fragility of things. They suture the wound, but cannot heal it.’

Likewise, the poems that were included in the two anthologies refuse to cover up the heartfelt suffering and vulnerability that they address, but in their search for an authentic expression of the emotions that lie at the heart of these texts, the poets who wrote them manage to touch a wide swathe of readers, each of whom feels personally addressed - this poem manages to express exactly how I feel, many readers will say, and they will feel the better for it, relieved of at least some of the pain that living inevitably brings.

References

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