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WORD HAVENS: READING ONE'S WAY OUT OF TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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Abstract: *Prompted by the attention received in recent years by the collateral benefits of reading and the growing prominence of bibliotherapy in the literary marketplace, this paper aims to investigate the therapeutic effects of books as they emerge from the experience of fictional characters, a perhaps less scientifically sound endeavour than empirical studies and clinical trials targeting real-life readers but one likely to occasion interesting perspectives on reading as a coping mechanism in the face of trauma. By focusing on a variety of reading experiences gleaned from a selection of novels ranging from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* and Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows' *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* and targeting acts of solitary communion with narrative as well as illicit seminars, informal book clubs and impromptu public readings, the analysis intends to highlight the extent to which literature can provide more than a mere pastime or intellectual challenge to its most vulnerable readers. Whether such benefits entail a sense of community, a temporary shelter from the hardships of war, a reprieve from the abuses of a totalitarian government or sanctuary from the less brutal but nevertheless haunting scars of broken relationships, parental disapproval or social rejection, the ultimate goal is to identify and assess the various survival strategies employed within these fictional universes.*

The last decade has witnessed renewed interest in the elusive link between the consumption of high literature and the development of enhanced “moral and social sensibilities” (Currie, “Great Literature”), as well as in “spiritual” reading’s perhaps less illusory abilities to foster thoughtfulness and compassion and “transcend the immediacy of the material, the moment, or even the moral choice at hand” (Swallow Prior, “Reading Human”). Neither Gregory Currie’s sceptical “Does Great Literature Make Us Better?” nor retaliations ranging from Annie Murphy Paul’s prompt panegyric on the value of deep reading, a practice whose “disappearance would imperil the intellectual and emotional development of generations growing up online” (“Reading Literature”), to Tom Blunt’s defence of “empathy-enhancement adventures” (“Literary Fiction”) seem to add much to the eloquent approaches to the topic to be found in texts such as Fay Weldon’s 1984 *Letters to Alice* or Harold Bloom’s 1994 *Western Canon*, to give but two examples. Indeed, variations on the conclusion that while literature “solves no problems and saves no souls” it is nevertheless “effective even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political

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or moral program” (Attridge 4) had been drawn on more than one occasion by “fellow-labourers in the vineyards of literature” (Lodge 38). However, while the more academic segments of the reading public had hopefully long been aware of the unfeasibility of living “by the ethics of the Iliad, or by the politics of Plato” (Bloom 40) and the serious threats posed by illiteracy, “insensitivity in the well-to-do” (Weldon 94) and “purported defenders” of “aesthetic and cognitive standards . . . who blather to us about moral and political values in literature” (Bloom 40) alike, recent revisitations of such issues have the undeniable merit of promoting the need to “practise the art of empathy” (Weldon 94) through reading to a considerably wider and quite likely younger audience.

Weldon’s metaphor of the nets fashioned by literature to “sustain and support the reader as he falls helplessly through the chaos of his own existence” (Weldon 28) and Bloom’s compelling disquisition on the extent to which readers of Shakespeare’s plays “behold and confront” in his characters’ plights “their own anguish, and their own fantasies” (Bloom 39) also help dispel some of the fear that “the therapeutic and ethical potential of literature” is more likely to be “marginalized and overlooked by literary critics” (Łyczkowski 416). Unsurprisingly enough, however, most of the recent coverage received by this less altruistic but equally vital relationship between readers and their own more or less complicated and troubled selves seems confined to endeavours targeting potential consumers of bibliotherapy, as is the case with the service set up by Alain de Botton’s *School of Life* to introduce overwhelmed readers to those “life-changing, eye-opening but often elusive works of literature” best suited to their individual needs:

You will be guided to books that can put their finger on feelings that you may often have had but perhaps never understood so clearly before; books that open new perspectives and re-enchante the world for you. . . . You will be asked to complete a questionnaire in advance of the session and you’ll be given an instant prescription to take away. Your full prescription will follow within a couple of days. (“Bibliotherapy”)

The more affordable alternative provided by the same team encourages readers to select their own narrative remedy from literary medicines compendia such as Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin’s 2013 *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You* or their 2016 *The Story Cure: An A-Z of Books to Keep Kids Happy, Healthy and Wise*. While serious readers are likely to dismiss such approaches as mere marketing ploys, it is important to remember that books have been prescribed by medical practitioners and psychologists for over a century, albeit as adjuncts to other treatments (J. Ogden, “Need Bibliotherapy”), and that the novels of Jane Austen were used by an Oxford tutor to alleviate the symptoms of severely shell-shocked World War I soldiers: “Who better to soothe minds unhinged at Passchendaele or the Somme? In the therapeutic calm of her pages history’s victims could escape from their nemesis.” (Fowler 275) Moreover, while bibliotherapy only received official recognition as a mental health treatment in 1941, some of its principles probably go as far back as the “House of Healing for the Soul” set up by King Ramses II for his book collection. In her condensed but comprehensive

survey of healing through reading. Jenni Ogden mentions the ancient Greek belief in the curative powers of libraries, the early 19th century attempts made by physicians such as Benjamin Rush and Minson Galt II to incorporate bibliotherapy in the rehabilitation and treatment of patients with mental illness, Sigmund Freud's momentous decision to fuse literature with psychoanalysis, the use of carefully selected reading materials to help returning World Wars I and II soldiers overcome both physical and emotional scars and recent conclusions on the superior therapeutic potential of fiction over all other types of printed text:

Research has shown that literary fiction enhances our ability to empathize with others, to put ourselves into another's shoes; to become more intuitive about other people's feelings (as well as our own), and to self-reflect on our problems as we read about and empathize with a fictional character who is facing similar problems. When we find ourselves weeping with or for the character in the story, we are also weeping for ourselves; a sort of catharsis. When our character finds happiness in the end, well perhaps so can we. When the story drops us into a hurricane, we learn from that, and if we are ever faced with a real one, it will not be an entirely new experience. We may discover ourselves coping in ways that we can only have learned from that novel we read years before. ("Need Bibliotherapy")

Interestingly enough, it is still within the texts of novels that we can also find more varied and considerably more compelling arguments in favour of the therapeutic potential of literature than perhaps in any of the books and articles listed above. One of the earliest such fictional examples of reassuring literary identification and empathy occurs in a text published almost exactly two centuries before the term 'bibliotherapy' was coined by Samuel Crothers in 1916 (Gilton 151) and it could be in fact argued that the Creature's response to literature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, particularly his identification with Milton's Satan and the tears he spills at the death of Werther (Pagan 69), stands out as the most memorable of the "identificatory substitutions" (D. Ogden 103) encouraged almost ad infinitum throughout the narrative. Sadly enough, the discovery of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a volume of Plutarch's *Lives*, and *Paradise Lost* lays the foundations of the Creature's most profound and probably healthiest interaction with thoughts and feelings other than his own: "As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener." (Wollstonecraft Shelley 153) Reading enables the Creature to experience "an infinity of new images and feelings" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 152) ranging from ecstasy to "the lowest dejection" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 153); while Goethe's text "accorded well with" the Creature's prior acquaintance with "despondency and gloom" and "with the wants which were forever alive" in his own heart and *Plutarch's Lives* prompted loftier thoughts, elevating him "above the wretched sphere" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 153) of personal reflections, it is *Paradise Lost* that occasions the most prominent instances of empathy and recognition:

It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several

situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; . . . Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (Wollstonecraft Shelley 154)

While *Paradise Lost* is likely to have provided the highest level of consolation and self-acceptance in the Creature's wretched existence, his eventual fate and *Werther's* rather dark reputation in the history of literary reception cast a certain level of doubt upon the salutary nature of his encounter with literature, potentially placing his experience with books within the remit of Jeffrey Berman's 1999 *Surviving Literary Suicide*. Berman's study targets the situation found at the other end of the reading spectrum from bibliotherapy, exploring "the conditions in which a reader's identification with a suicidal character may lead to heightened vulnerability", aiming to establish the extent to which "a story's glorification of suicide" (Berman 1) may further weaken a manic depressive's already precarious health or even imperil the balance of a psychologically stable reader, but also examining literature's potential role in suicide prevention and ultimately affirming its "power to move readers deeply, heightening their connection to life" (Berman 14). A key example employed by perhaps the most convincing subject in his classroom experiment is *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), the autobiographical account of William Styron's life-long struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts, almost culminating in the same tragic fate shared by a large number of his protagonists. Feeling "a bit like Emma Bovary" (Styron, *Darkness* 30) in relationship with his psychiatrist and relentlessly pursued by haunting echoes ranging from the "fundamental question of philosophy" (Styron, *Darkness* 14) outlined at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to Baudelaire's "wind of the wing of madness" (Styron, *Darkness* 27) and comprising the "durable thread of woe" (Styron, *Darkness* 47) pervading the entire course of literature and art, the tormented narrator of *Darkness Visible* ends up encountering both the "fathomless ordeal" of "the unknowable, the black struggle to come" (Styron, *Darkness* 47) and a rekindling of hope within the same set of Dantesque metaphors: "In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, For I had lost the right path. . . . And so we came forth, and once again beheld the stars." (Styron, *Darkness* 47-48)

Following her evacuation from Auschwitz, Styron's most memorable protagonist seeks solace in the printed matter she had been deprived of for years, going as far as to break the vow made "in the prison camp, to forswear for the rest of her life anything written in German" for the sake of a "felicitous and rich" rendering of "Wolfe's lyrical, tragic though optimistic and sweeping vision of America" (Styron, *Sophie* 98), the very type of text demanded at the time by her newcomer's soul. When her tentative grasp of English finally enables her to tackle the "representative American verse" selected by her teacher, Sophie finds herself "touched often and deeply by this poetry which from time to time brought exciting new nuances of meaning to the language" and "captured in particular by the haunted melody" of Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" (Styron, *Sophie* 109). Given literature's therapeutic potential and Sophie's own extreme responsiveness to all forms of artistic expression, it would be quite interesting to speculate on the alternative

trajectory towards healing and self-forgiveness her life might have followed in the absence of the “innocuous misunderstanding” concerning the poet’s identity, “a crucial piece in the finally assembled little mosaic which resolved itself as the portrait of her meeting with Nathan” (Styron, *Sophie* 110), driving her from the peace of a largely solitary communion with literature towards the destructiveness of pathological romance. Such idle speculation is nevertheless cut short by the incisive hostility of the “pallid dour thirtyish man with aggressive horn-rims and a green eyeshade, . . . a startling double of every heavy, unbending, mirthless German bureaucrat and demimonsster she had known in years past” (Styron, *Sophie* 111) in charge of an ostensible “sanctuary not only for language and mutual respect, but constancy and openness and acceptance and tolerance” (Bush 417) and by the Brooklyn College library’s consequent failure to provide its perhaps most vulnerable visitor with the safe haven and judgement-free oasis she seeks.

More likely than not, the uncanny ability to find or create such sanctuaries constitutes one of the crucial factors ensuring the survival of the younger fictional female trapped in the same war in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, one of the numerous texts whose aesthetic value is overshadowed by the insight they grant their young readers into another child’s fears and concerns (Blunt, “Literary Fiction”). While unable to remember the precise moment “when the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything” and decide whether the real turning point of her existence resided in the instant “when she first set eyes on the room with shelves and shelves of them” or in the shared comfort of reading in the shelters (Zusak 23), Liesel cultivates a deeply symbiotic relationship with books even before acquiring the ability to read them for herself, liberating random volumes from German pyres and private libraries alike and equipping herself with the tools needed to stay sane and help anchor others in a bearable plane of existence. A particularly memorable episode in this last respect is represented by the bubble of peace conjured up when Liesel’s reading manages to silence both the “tune of bombs” and the “din of the basement”:

. . . soon, a quietness started bleeding through the crowded basement. By page three, everyone was silent but Liesel.

She didn’t dare to look up, but she could feel their frightened eyes hanging on to her as she hauled the words in and breathed them out. . . . The sound of the turning page carved them in half. Liesel read on.

For at least twenty minutes, she handed out the story. The youngest kids were soothed by her voice, and everyone else saw visions of the whistler running from the crime scene. . . .

Everyone waited for the ground to shake.

That was still an immutable fact, but at least they were distracted now, by the girl with the book. (Zusak 258)

While within the confines of mundane reality the almost miraculous revelation that “Himmel Street was untouched” by the bombs might strike readers as a fortuitous coincidence, the magical realist atmosphere of the narrative allows for the suspension of disbelief required to conclude that Liesel’s neighbours might owe her a debt of gratitude that goes far beyond thanking her for “the distraction” (Zusak 259).

Stranded in a comparatively idyllic location during the final weeks of the same watershed event, Ondaatje's protagonists develop even more intricate relationships with books, which are creatively employed to provisionally reconstruct torn psyches and physical shelters alike: "The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left. She had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps." (Ondaatje 13) A living "repository of information about the past" (Goldman 68), the English patient holds on to a palimpsest of printed pages, handwritten entries and mementoes that justifies his former colonial agenda, carries echoes of his star-crossed romance and reflects his fragmented and multifaceted identity: "It is the book he brought with him through the fire – a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus." (Ondaatje 16) Hana's own diary keeping perpetuates the same fusion of the reading and writing self, but her tendency to scatter her memoirs in random volumes rather than preserve them in a unified text singles her out as the perfect incarnation of the "collective exile in which a whole generation is caught up" (Garcia Ramirez 81): "She opens *The Last of the Mohicans* to the blank page at the back and begins to write in it. . . . She closes the book and then walks down into the library and conceals it in one of the high shelves." (Ondaatje 61)

While the vast majority of the fictionalised accounts of war mentioned in this paper deal with the therapeutic effects of literature on civilians, in Graham Swift's *Waterland* traditional storytelling is creatively combined by another nurse with an oral version of the journal therapy sporadically practised by Hana. Instead of encouraging the self-imposed amnesia providing Henry Crick with a brief and precarious respite from post-traumatic stress disorder, his future wife prompts him to sublimate his darkest memories of the mire of Flanders into innocuous narratives to arguably greater effect than conventional psychiatric treatment:

Does Helen Atkinson, too, then, believe in miracles? No, but she believes in stories. She believes that they're a way of bearing what won't go away, a way of making sense of madness. Inside the nurse there lurks the mother, and in three years at the Kessling Home for Neurasthenics Helen has come to regard these poor, deranged inmates as children. Like frightened children, what they most want is to be told stories. And out of this discovery she evolves a precept: No, don't forget. Don't erase it. You can't erase it. But make it into a story. Just a story. Yes, everything's crazy. What's real? All a story. Only a story... (Swift 225-226)

Trapped on one of the two patches of British soil occupied by the German army and brought together by a rather surreal concatenation of circumstances, the members of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society fail in their endeavour to emulate a professional book club by cultivating a "calm and objective" approach to the printed word, yet gain an infinitely more valuable sense of kinship and a temporary respite from the pervading bleakness and fear: "We read books, talked books, argued over books, and became dearer and dearer to one another. Other Islanders asked to join us, and our evenings together became bright, lively times – we could almost forget, now and then, the darkness outside." (Shaffer and Barrows 46)

Notwithstanding their general lack of literary expertise, some of the more diligent readers in the group reach conclusions uncannily similar to Bloom's regarding Shakespeare's insight and impact, albeit expressed in a less academic and considerably more subjective discourse:

It seems to me the less he said, the more beauty he made. Do you know what sentence of his I admire the most? It is 'The bright day is done, and we are for the dark.' I wish I'd known those words on the day I watched those German troops land, plane-load after planeload of them – and come off ships down in the harbor! All I could think of was *damn them, damn them*, over and over. If I could have thought the words 'the bright day is done and we are for the dark,' I'd have been consoled somehow and ready to go out and contend with circumstance – instead of my heart sinking to my shoes. (Shaffer and Barrows 56)

In actual fact even the most cynical and least adventurous reader in their midst somehow finds in *The Letters of Seneca* an antidote to "the direful life of a drunk" (Shaffer and Barrows 78), an awareness of the timeless nature of certain human realities and an unexpected companion:

It seems to me that his words travel well – to all men in all times. I will give you a living sample: take the Luftwaffe and their hairdos. . . . When I saw them in their hairnets, walking five abreast down the street, elbowing Islanders off the sidewalk, I thought of Seneca's words about the Praetorian Guard. He'd written –'who of these would not rather see Rome disordered than his hair.' . . . I came to love our book meetings – they helped to make the Occupation bearable. Some of their books sounded all right, but I stayed true to Seneca. I came to feel that he was talking to me – in his funny, biting way – but talking only to me. His letters helped to keep me alive in what was to come later. (Shaffer and Barrows 79-81)

As the occupation stretches on into days "grey with hard work" and evenings "black with boredom", reading continues to engender support and provide a buffer against cold weather, malnourishment and despondency – "We clung to books and to our friends; they reminded us that we had another part to us." (Shaffer and Barrows 56) – the entire narrative ultimately functioning as a considerably more elaborate and eloquent version of Juliet's answer to the "practical, moral, and philosophical value of reading" question asked by the *Times*: "so far my only thought is that reading keeps you from going gaga." (Shaffer and Barrows 28)

Half a century later and halfway across the world, in a narrative which "dramatises the saving power of reading, both short-term as an affecting means of reducing fear, and long-term as an explanation and inspiration for life", another pillar of the western canon is used to "soothe, heal and explain, offer consolation and instruction" (Klonowska 231) to a community whose humble yet placid existence is taken over by the murky agenda of an absurd civil war. Introduced to a single narrative belonging to a culture far removed from their experience by a teacher whose "survival weapon was a story" (Jones 219), the children of Bougainville enter a monogamous relationship with a literary work reminiscent of John's commitment to *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* in Huxley's *Brave New World*. However, instead of

channelling their negative emotions, *Great Expectations* provides solace (Łyczkowski 418) by enabling them to temporarily escape an increasingly disquieting reality: “It was always a relief . . . It contained a world that was whole and made sense, unlike ours.” (Jones 58) At a much younger age than all of the fictional readers alluded to thus far, Matilda learns how “to enter the soul of another” (Jones 50), finds an alternative family within the pages of a book – “Pip, Miss Havisham and Joe Gargery were more part of my life than my dead relatives, even the people around me.” (Jones 65) – and escapes her deeply traumatic circumstances not only relatively unscathed but also equipped with an invaluable set of coping mechanisms:

People sometimes ask me ‘Why Dickens?’ which I always take to be a gentle rebuke. I point to the one book that supplied me with another world at a time when it was desperately needed. It gave me a friend in Pip. It taught me you can slip under the skin of another just as easily as your own, even when that skin is white and belongs to a boy alive in Dickens’ England. Now if that isn’t an act of magic I don’t know what is. (Jones 198-199)

Likewise, the protagonists of Azar Nafisi’s semi-autobiographical *Memoir in Books* seek in texts such as *Lolita* not so much a narrative that would resonate with female experience in the Islamic Republic of Iran but a way of circumventing “the tyranny of time and politics” (Nafisi 6) and overcoming their “present trapped situation as women” (Nafisi 19) living in a totalitarian republic: “in most of Nabokov’s novels . . . there was always the shadow of another world, one that was only attainable through fiction. It is this world that prevents his heroes and heroines from utter despair, that becomes their refuge in a life that is consistently brutal.” (Nafisi 33) Alternately moving in and out of the texts they read in search of the elusive link between “the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones” (Nafisi 19) they were confined to, students and teacher alike gain a unique insight into both reality and fiction and redefine the notion of independence:

There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like *Lolita* we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. . . . The novels were an escape from reality in the sense that we could marvel at their beauty and perfection, and leave aside our stories about the deans and the university and the morality squads in the streets. . . . Curiously, the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities, about which we felt so helplessly speechless. (Nafisi 25-39)

Given their prior experience of academic reading, Nafisi’s protagonists are unlikely to be strangers to books’ vital role as companions on one’s “leisurely hike to the crematorium” (Atwood 140) or the reassuring sense of belonging accompanying the realization that one’s “longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone” (Fitzgerald 10), nor are their circumstances as dire as those of other fictional readers; nevertheless, their relatively precarious chances of happiness and the clandestine nature of their seminars would suggest that they are in at least as much need of “the critical and almost magical power of literature” (Nafisi 18) and,

what is perhaps more relevant to the scope of this study, their experience is likely to be sufficiently relatable to persuade one's own real-life students of the vast range and potential of personal interactions with narrative.

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