This essay argues that despite its significance within the history of bibliotherapy, Samuel McChord Crothers’s 1916 essay “A Literary Clinic” is a stranger point of origin than proponents have realized—one with implications for conceptualizing reading and its reparative uses more broadly.

Medicines of the Soul: Reparative Reading and the History of Bibliotherapy

JESSE MILLER

The books we read should be chosen with great care, that they may be, as an Egyptian king wrote over his library, “The medicines of the soul.”

—Tyron Edwards, A Dictionary of Thoughts

If at the end of the nineteenth century Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell famously forbade Charlotte Perkins Gilman from reading or writing as part of her treatment for neurasthenia (Gilman 96), today it seems doctors are more likely to prescribe reading as a cure than to censor it. This intentional use of reading for the promotion of mental and emotional health is commonly known as bibliotherapy. Book historian Leah Price has written of recent bibliotherapeutic literary public health programs in the UK like Books on Prescription and Mood Boosting Books. These programs receive funding from the National Health Service and enable physicians to prescribe self-help books, fiction, and poetry to patients suffering from various mild to moderate psychiatric conditions. And some researchers have recently sought to empirically study the psychological effects of reading literary texts, most notably Keith Oatley.
Literary critic Timothy Aubry has noted these tendencies by claiming that contemporary readers in the United States “treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy” (1). But in fact in bibliotherapy aesthetics has become linked to health, with art increasingly a tool used in the pursuit of well-being.

Critiques of therapeutic culture abound. In 1966 Philip Rieff, surveying the triumph of a historically new character type that he called “psychological man,” suggested an emerging therapeutic culture would transform how and why people read; he prophesied that literature would in the future be “preserved mainly for [its] therapeutic potential” (Triumph 25). Where literature had once provided “therapy of commitment” through a system of symbols that bound individuals to a community, Rieff worried that in the future its function would be reduced to “therapy of release,” what he perceived as the superficial, private ends of personal growth, self-expression, and pleasure. The result, he feared, would be the end of a vibrant and participatory public culture. More recently, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, Brian A. Bremen, James McWilliams, and Patricia Waugh have all responded critically to this aesthetics of health, arguing that attempting to use literature to therapeutic ends involves a reductive account of both the experience of reading and of reactions to literary texts. In emphasizing the instrumental value of the reader’s identification with a character and subsequent achievement of self-understanding, self-growth, and renewed well-being, they argue, bibliotherapy underplays the ways literature can challenge, disrupt, and disturb one’s sense of self.

In her collection of essays Against Interpretation, published the same year as Rieff’s warning, Susan Sontag provided a more capacious account of the emerging bibliotherapeutic sensibility: “What we are getting is not the demise of art, but a transformation of the function of art. [. . .] Art today is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility” (297). This statement might be read as a response to Rieff, an alternative account of the therapeutic use of art—the two were briefly married and co-wrote the study Freud: The Mind of the Moralist (although Sontag agreed as part of divorce proceedings to renounce all credit for the work) (Poague and Parsons). Art in the twentieth century, Sontag agrees with Rieff, no longer functions as a “genteel-moralistic” guide binding individuals to a communal tradition. Its use should be understood, she argues, not as a narcissistic retreat from the world, but rather a source of “nourishment” that “returns us to the world in some way more open and enriched” (37). Recent attempts, under banners such as “postcritical reading,” “surface reading” (Best and Marcus), and especially “reparative reading” (Sedgwick), have similarly sought to move beyond a critical
hermeneutics and toward a descriptive poetics sensitive to the multiple affective attachments binding readers to texts. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, refers to the reparative motive of reading as the desire “to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (149). Based on this idea, she influentially urged critics to attend to “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150).

According to Sedgwick, the reason critics tend to dismiss these reparative, therapeutic aspects of reading is “the limitations of present theoretical vocabularies”: “the vocabulary for articulating any reader’s reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it’s no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives” (150). Similarly for Rita Felski, how critics talk about the use of literature is central to the kinds of readings they produce. While critical interpretation as a sensibility or style of thinking has depended on notions of “digging down” into and “standing back” from texts, Felski argues that what is needed is “an analytical language for reflecting on, rather than repudiating, [one’s] aesthetic attachments” (Limits 181).

One way of developing such language, I argue, is to study how people have historically reflected upon the value of reading in spaces outside of the academy. While this project is never fully realized in her own work on the subject, Sedgwick points toward this solution in suggesting that a new methodology attentive and open to reparative motives of reading involves a practice of historical inquiry, an investigation into the ways readers engage with culture reparatively. What she underplays, though, is the relationship between these reparative motives for reading and the language used to reflect upon and advocate for them. Taking such insights as a starting point in this essay, I intervene on contemporary debates about therapeutic culture and its effects on how we use literature by shifting focus to what I call the trope of the literary clinic—the system of metaphors describing books as medicine, readers as patients, and reading as a form of therapy—through which such debates have played out. As Steven Mailloux has argued, it is through the “cultural rhetoric of reading,” circulating within different social institutions, that aesthetic experience is mediated and particular theories and practices of interpretation become culturally meaningful (Reception 55). To demonstrate this, I turn to the conflicted origins of the term bibliotherapy in order to trace the genealogy of metaphors, narratives, and arguments underlying contemporary bibliotherapeutic practice.