A Therapeutic Library

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Introduction

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On Therapeutic Reading

On average, a person might read 1,000 books in their lifetime. If they are doing especially well, it might be 2,000 or 3,000. The issue is that there are around 130 million books in the world, and they are being added to at a rate of 4 or so million a year.

In other words, from the perspective of numbers alone, the onus is on us to choose very carefully indeed.

One of the challenges in doing so is that most of the noise around books concerns the newest titles. Many of these are worthy, but by definition they represent only the latest output in the long history of writing. It is therefore unlikely that, of all the books we could choose from, the ones most useful to us will be among those released in the preceding twelve months.

Another challenge lies in the distribution of prestige. Our societies tend to operate with powerful lists of books they deem hugely significant. It is to these that our attention is drawn from an early age and that seem to hold the key to enlightenment and wisdom. Many of these books are indeed astonishing and brilliant, but a great many more might, if we could dare to say what we really thought, strike us as turgid and irrelevant.

Honesty then becomes a central problem. The fear of disliking or being bored by a book deemed a masterpiece by prestigious voices holds us back from being properly ourselves. We stymie our authentic interests and risk in time losing a personal connection with books altogether. We need works that will change *our* lives and have a revelatory influence on *our* minds, not books that had a momentous impact on *other* people who were probably quite unlike us. Fame alone can't be the guide to a true relationship with a work of literature.

While resisting the pressure to make our way through an ever-larger number of titles, we might pause to reflect on a fascinating aspect of the premodern world: this world rarely put people under any pressure to read very much at all. Reading was held to be extremely important, but the number of new books one read was entirely by the by. This wasn't principally an economic point. Books were very expensive, of course, but this wasn't really the issue. What mattered was to read a few books very well, not to squander one's attention promiscuously on a great number of volumes.

The premodern world directed people to read so little because it was obsessed by a question that modernity likes to dodge: *what is the point of reading?* And it had answers. To take a supreme example, Christians and Muslims located the value of reading in a very specific and narrow goal: the attainment of holiness. To read was to try to approximate the mind of God. In each case this meant that one book, and one book only – the Bible or the Quran – was held up as vastly and incomparably more important than any other. To read this book, repeatedly and with great attention, probably five or so pages every day, was thought more crucial than to rush through a whole library every week. In fact, reading widely would have been regarded with suspicion, because most other books would to some extent have to prove misleading and distracting.

Similarly, in the Ancient Greek world, one was meant to focus in on a close knowledge of just two books, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, because these were deemed the perfect repository of the Greek code of honour and the best guides to action in military and civilian affairs.

We can pick up some of this minimalist attitude to reading in early visual depictions of one of the heroes of Christian scholarship, Saint Jerome. He was considered one of the supreme intellects of Christendom, a man who translated the Greek and Hebrew portions of the Bible into Latin, wrote a large number of commentaries

on scripture and became the patron saint of libraries and librarians.

But despite all his scholarly efforts, when it came to depictions of Saint Jerome, one detail stands out: there are almost no books in his famous study. Strikingly, the most intelligent and thoughtful intellectual of the early church seems to have read fewer things than an average modern 8-year-old. In this painting by Antonello da Messina, Saint Jerome appears to be the proud owner of no more than around ten books.

Antonello da Messina,
Saint Jerome in his Study, c. 1475

The modern world has dramatically parted ways with this minimalist ancient approach to reading. We have adopted an Enlightenment viewpoint that runs in a very different direction, stating that there should be no limit to how much we read. In considering why we do so, there is only one response that will ever be encompassing or ambitious enough: *we read in order to know everything.*

However, we can hazard an observation: this exhaustive approach to reading does not make us particularly happy. In order to ease and simplify our lives, we might dare to ask a very old-fashioned question: *what am I reading for?* This time, rather than answering 'in order to know everything', we might have a much more limited, focused and useful goal. We might decide on a new mantra to guide our reading henceforth: *we want to read in order to learn to be content.*

With this new, more targeted, ambition in mind, much of the pressure to read constantly and randomly starts to fade. Once we know that we are reading to be content, we don't need to chase every book published this season. We can zero in on titles that best explain what we deem to be the constituent parts of contentment. For example, we may need a few key books that will explain our psyches to us, that will teach us about how families work and how they might work better, that can take us through how to find a job we can love or how to develop the courage to develop our opportunities. We'll probably need some books that talk about friendship and love, sexuality and health, and some that gently guide us to how to minimise regret and learn to die well.

This is why we have written this book: it amounts to a list of the books that might be key in helping us to lead less agitated, dispirited or pained lives; it is a guide to an ideal therapeutic library.

The more we understand what reading is for us, the more we can enjoy intimate relationships with a few works only. The truly well-read person isn't one who has read a gargantuan number of books; it is someone who has let themselves be deeply shaped by just a few well-chosen titles.

Raphael, *School of Athens*, Aristotle and Plato at the centre, c. 1509–1511

The purpose of literature is to treat disorders of the mind, just as the purpose of medicine is to treat disorders of the body.

Aristotle,
Poetics, c. 335 BCE

Far from being a new or marginal approach, the idea of books as therapy goes back to the earliest Western ideas about what reading is for. The *Poetics*, written by Aristotle around 335 BCE, when he was in his 50s and living in Athens, focuses on one major strand of literature: tragic stories in which terrible things happen to decent people. Such stories were traditionally presented on stage at public festivals all over Ancient Greece, but the texts were also readily available. Aristotle asks a fundamental question: what's the point of engaging with such tales? Aren't there enough horrors in the world?

His answer is this: a well-told tragedy explains the small, understandable steps, such as anyone might make in the circumstances, that lead 'a slightly better than average person', as we may take ourselves to be, with ordinary, minor flaws of character, to ruin and disgrace. The art of the tragic writer is to provide a compelling explanation of how and why such a terrible fate could befall us or people we love. Tragedy moves us to pity and compassion because it makes us feel close to the troubles that we'd prefer to feel could only happen to distant others.

In Aristotle's eyes, tragedy is a cure – or therapy – for a specific problem of the psyche or soul: indifference or hardness of heart. Specifically, he calls the cure a 'catharsis' or unblocking. Our instinctive sympathy for others, which we felt as children, gets stopped by our adult preoccupation with success; the right stories help tenderness flow again.

Up to this point, 'therapy' had mainly been used in connection with medicine, where it meant any treatment of a bodily disorder. Aristotle, who had trained as a doctor and came from a successful medical family, simply extends the idea of treatment to what he called the *psyche*, meaning the mind or the soul. The notion of psychotherapy has one of its taproots here, in this unexpected place: in Aristotle's discussion of why we should read certain kinds of stories.

Aristotle's approach has a particular structure. Like a medical doctor, he diagnoses a problem (the blockage of sympathy) and then recommends a specific therapy (well-written tragic drama). This is the approach we're going to follow too. The reason for recommending a work isn't that it is broadly 'interesting' or 'something every well-educated person should have read' but more private and psychological. The book can be seen as offering a 'cure' or at least a helpful treatment for a particular suffering or sorrow of inner life.

We're not suggesting that all the books discussed in this book are for everyone. Rather, we are exploring the therapeutic help that certain works offer. But which kinds of therapy any of us need depends on the specifics of our own minds: the spendthrift needs different book friends from the miser; the overly shy person needs different recommendations than the person who cannot bear to be alone with themselves. We are in search of the books that can cure our particular ailments.

Alexandre-Hyacinthe Dunouy, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau dans le parc de Rochecardon*, 1795

Because we are reading for therapy – the healing of our souls – we can take a seemingly unconventional approach to engaging with a book.