

LITERATURE AND CONSOLATION

Fictions of Comfort

Jürgen Pieters



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Introduction: Fictions of Comfort

Always comforting to assume there is a secret
behind what torments you.

Anne Carson, *Nox*¹

On my writing desk sits a randomly organised stack of books whose titles immediately betray a common concern: *How Dante Can Save Your Life* (2015), *Jane Austen's Guide to Modern Life's Dilemmas* (2012), *Les livres prennent soin de nous* (2015), *Lesen als Medizin* (2015), *The Novel Cure* (2013), *The Western Lit Survival Kit* (2012), *The End of Your Life Book Club* (2012), *How Literature Saved My Life* (2013), *Petit guide de lectures qui aident à vivre* (2010), *Doktor Erich Kästners Lyrische Hausapotheke* (2016).² Judging by their title pages, each of these books is concerned with the wholesome effect the 'perusal' of literary writings may have on those reading them. Their common point can hardly be misunderstood. Literary authors have the power to save lives. Their books can serve as guides that help one either to survive or die well. In the end, poems and stories are, well, just about the best medicine possible.

What these books also have in common, as the years of their publication indicate, is a shared moment of production. Apart from the last title in the above list – its first edition (1936) predates the Second World War – all of these books were written and published in the course of the decade that precedes my current reflections. Their number continues to increase. As I was drafting the first version of this introduction, several new titles began to land on top of the ever-growing stack on my desk: Viv Groskop's *The Anna Karenina Fix: Life Lessons from Russian Literature* (2018), William Sieghart's *The Poetry Pharmacy* (2017) and *The Poetry Pharmacy Returns* (2019), Laura Freeman's *Reading Cure: How Books Restored my Appetite* (2019), Michael McGirr's *Books that Saved my Life* (2018) and Katharine Smyth's *All the Lives We Ever Lived* (2019).³ The latter's alliterative subtitle – *Seeking Solace in*

Virginia Woolf – makes clearer than the book's main title why it belongs here as well. The soul-saving strength of books, Smyth seems to suggest, is synonymous with the success of their consolatory force. (In this, she appears to agree with McGirr, the subtitle of whose book – *Reading for Wisdom, Solace and Pleasure* – points in the same direction.)

I bought most of these books in my favourite bookshop in the Flemish town where I work. While the town harbours a middle-large university, the bookshop does not primarily target an academic readership. Its clientele consists of amateur-readers, mainly. To be clear: I'm using that term in the most positive sense possible; these amateurs are true book lovers, well-informed ones at that. The shop has a large literature section, offers good coffee and cakes (so I am told), and also specialises in children's literature and books on cooking and gardening, sections whose contents I browse only on rare occasions.

I found most of the books mentioned above, at regular intervals over the past few years, on the same table in the corner of the shop's literature section. The table caters for readers who are not simply interested in the latest quality fiction, but also in other books, non-fictional mostly, that conceive of the reading of literature in terms of a way of living, an 'ars vivendi atque legendi', the living of one's life with and among books. 'Bibliophiles', one could call these readers, though not in the traditional, technical sense of that word. The works that I just listed are neither rare nor precious, and they are not particularly expensive either. The lovers of books whom my local bookstore aims to serve have an interest in a diverse array of topics that bear on the distinct pleasures involved in reading, cherishing and collecting books. Its literature section will also have on display books about bookshops (Jen Campbell's *Weird Things Customers Say in Bookshops* (2012), for instance, or her later *The Bookshop Book* (2014)), books about the history and the future of the book (Amaranth Borsuk's *The Book* (2018)), books about how writers organise their personal libraries (Leah Price's *Unpacking my Library: Writers and their Books* (2011)), books containing witticisms about books (*The Book Lovers' Anthology* (2015)), and, finally, little notebooks or diaries in which readers can take down their most personal ideas about whatever new novel they just want everybody to know they love.⁴ As it happens, these notebooks come in a dazzling variety of shapes, colours and titles – I have seen Edgar Allan Poe notebooks ('Get inspired to write your spookiest horror tales'), Alice in Wonderland notebooks ('It's small enough to fit with you when you fall down the rabbit hole, too') and *Logophile* notebooks ('This journal

is made to look like an authentic library check-out card – what could be better?’).

The books whose titles I started by singling out are a distinct subset of the broader range of the ‘bibliophilia’ to which I just referred. Each of them defines the love (‘philia’) of the book (‘biblion’) in terms of the healthy impact reading may have on the individual reader’s state of mind. Books are good for us, the writers of these works suggest, and that is why we should keep reading them. Each of the above titles deals with the curative force of literature, with the therapeutic value of reading the right novel or poem at the right time. In *How Dante Can Save Your Life*, for instance, Rod Dreher tells the poignant story of how his reading of the *Divine Comedy* helped him come out of the severe depression that hit him sometime around the middle of his life, ‘nel mezzo del cammin’, as Dreher’s thirteenth-century Italian guide put it. Will Schwalbe’s *The End of Your Life Book Club* recalls and no doubt also stages sessions of shared reading between the author and his dying mother, in which the books – and, even more so, their readers’ heartening conversations about them – turn out to be really helpful for both members of this very special book club. Katharine Smyth, finally, shows how her youthful fascination with Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* – a favourite since her junior year in Oxford – developed into a deeper understanding of the novel and its place in both her and its author’s life, as the book helped her come to terms with her father’s alcoholism and accompanying prolonged and fatal illness. Woolf’s novel, Smyth comes to see in a more fundamental way, is really about the absence of a parent, a feeling that its author, unfortunately, knew all too well.

Bibliotherapy

Each of these three titles, together with the other books that I mentioned earlier, belong to the specific branch of ‘bibliophilia’ that is commonly labelled ‘bibliotherapy’ – the gentle art of healing by means of the books that one reads.⁵ The term (a mere neologism at the beginning of the previous century, even though the practice to which it refers can be said to be age-old) is by now usually taken to stand for two separate, yet clearly interlinked, meanings. It refers to both a serious (psycho-)medical practice that involves the use of literary texts to help patients come to terms with specific aspects of their medical condition and to an often more ironically self-conscious critical practice that involves the prescription of reading materials in a more informal

context of self-help and self-improvement. In the definition offered by *Webster's International Dictionary*, in which the word first features in 1961,⁶ bibliotherapy is said to refer to either '[t]he use of selected reading materials as therapeutic adjuvants in medicine and psychiatry' or, in a more general way, to other non-clinical forms of 'guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading.'⁷ Natalia Tukhareli, author of one of the few recent scholarly monographs on the subject,⁸ puts it like this:

'Bibliotherapy' is an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of clinical (therapeutic) and non-clinical (developmental, creative, social) interventions involving books, reading, and communication around texts. In the broadest sense of the term, bibliotherapy is the systematic use of books to assist individuals in dealing with mental, physical, emotional, developmental, or social problems.⁹

'Bibliotherapy', Jacqueline Stanley writes in a slightly older book, 'is the therapeutic use of books in the treatment of illnesses or personal problems.'¹⁰

In neither of the two meanings distinguished above should practitioners of 'bibliotherapy' be seen to be representing the latest methodological development in literary scholarship, in the way that, for instance, scholars working in the fields of animal studies, ecocriticism, cognitivist scholarship or digital humanities have recently been said to open up new perspectives in the academic discipline of literary studies. In the first meaning of the word, bibliotherapy as an institutionalised clinical practice, it generally appears to belong to the domain of specialists in the fields of medicine and psychiatry, even though interdisciplinary collectives of bibliotherapeutic endeavours, operating in the wider domain of the so-called medical humanities, will usually have connections with scholars or librarians working in the field of literature. The earliest instances of this institutionalised practice go back to the beginning of the twentieth century, as doctors and librarians in military hospitals in the United States worked together in prescribing the reading of specific books to soldiers coming back from the First World War.¹¹

In English, the word is said to have been used for the first time in a satirical essay by the Unitarian minister Samuel McChord Crothers, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in the September issue of 1916.¹² 'A Literary Clinic', the essay is called. In it, the author stages a conversation with his minister-friend Bagster who in his church organises sessions of 'Book Treatment',¹³ prescribing

specific writings (literary and other) to patients who suffer from one or other form of mental discomfort. ‘During the last year’, Bagster tells his interlocutor, ‘I have been working up a system of Biblio-therapeutics. I don’t pay much attention to the purely literary or historical classifications. 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?”’¹⁴ ‘The true function of a literary critic’, he goes on to conclude, ‘is not to pass judgement on the book, but to diagnose the condition of the person who has read it. What was his state of mind before reading and after reading? Was he better or worse for this experience?’¹⁵

In the course of the century that separates us from Crothers, the literature on bibliotherapy has developed exponentially, especially in academic journals of medicine, library studies and psychiatry, in which an ever-growing number of research reports testify to the success of the clinical practice for patients (and their relatives and loved ones) all over the world. In the second meaning of the term, bibliotherapists similarly prescribe books to be read or reflect otherwise on the therapeutic value of reading, but in this case the practice stands for a distinctly non-clinical critical endeavour, likewise centring on the concerns of the common reader, whose interests, many think, have not been served at all well by the literary scholarship of the past decades. In this case, bibliotherapists are not real doctors with an actual clinical training, but like their (presumed) patients are amateur-readers themselves. The logic that underlies their therapeutic practice is that their ‘pretence’ prescriptions would definitely not work if they were couched in the specialist jargon that according to some has come to dominate literary studies in the recent past. This form of bibliotherapy thrives on the pleasures of reading, and the treatment that it aims for needs to increase that pleasure, not down-play or kill it.

Also, the practice is generally sustained by the presumed solidarity between ‘doctor’ and ‘patient’, in the sense that the former is supposedly able to personally vouch for the effectiveness of the medicine prescribed. While real doctors need not have taken the drugs they administer to be certain of their effectiveness, ‘book doctors’ will definitely have read the books whose healing powers they proclaim – at least, their reading advice is premised on the promise that they have. William Sieghart, to give an example, in his collection of ‘prescriptions’ that make up *The Poetry Pharmacy*, keeps

reminding his readers that the poems he selected for people who came to him for reading advice worked for him personally, in trying circumstances that he shared with his interlocutors. Hence the adjectives with which the book's subtitle opens: *Tried-and-True Prescriptions for the Heart, Mind and Soul*. Sieghart's pharmaceutical library is made up of poems, he writes, 'which I know from experience will help people through most conceivable difficulties of day-to-day life: through the various faces and frustrations of love, grief, work and all the other concerns that dominate our thoughts.'¹⁶

Literature and Consolation

Let me make clear from the outset that the present book is not itself an attempt at bibliotherapy. Neither is it a book that explains what bibliotherapy is, what it can do, or what it needs to do in order to become (more) effective. This book's relationship to bibliotherapy is at once tangential and fundamental. The chapters that follow touch upon the subject only marginally, but they do so in a way that goes to the heart of bibliotherapy's central claim: the conviction that literary writings have the power to heal. More specifically, I will be dealing throughout in what follows with the idea that I singled out earlier with reference to Katharine Smyth's book about Virginia Woolf: the idea that the therapeutic value of literary writings is related to (or even boils down to) the fact that books offer solace. Laura Freeman's *The Reading Cure* – which, incidentally, also has a chapter on Woolf – seems to underscore Smyth's point. 'I want to write about the solace of reading', Freeman exclaims at the end of the chapter that introduces her readers to the story of her struggle with anorexia, a story which revolves around the books that helped (and still help) her come to terms with that disorder.¹⁷ While Smyth and Freeman are not really concerned with what it is, exactly, in the books that helped their recovery, nor with how best to describe or analyse what they consider the 'consolations' of reading, they seem to agree that the curative effect of their encounters with specific texts can be summed up by that keyword: 'solace'. (To be clear: Smyth and Freeman do not 'prescribe' the books that have helped them in their search for mental comfort; they reflect on what it is in these books that worked therapeutically for them.)

Generally, attempts to sustain the claim that reading books can truly have a healing effect sooner or later (sooner rather than later, usually) refer to the consoling power of literary writings. Quite often, as in Smyth and Freeman, the suggestion seems to be that consolation is,

actually, what the healing force of reading is all about. Bibliotherapy, the French philosopher Marc-Alain Ouaknin writes in an etymological reflection on the word's Greek roots, is *therapeia*, not *iatrikè*¹⁸ – it is not a practice that pretends to have the power to heal people physically, in the way that 'true' medicine is said to do. *Therapeia* involves mental caretaking, *cura animarum* as it was called in Latin, careful and caring attempts to repair a state of mind and enable people who suffer to return to a more healthy situation.¹⁹ The practice of consolation also does all of those things, obviously, which is exactly why the healing power of books and the consolatory force of reading are generally treated as nearly synonymous, as Tukhareli also makes clear in her book on bibliotherapy. Like other forms of art therapy, she writes, 'bibliotherapy emphasizes the idea of the healing, consoling power of art through its various forms'.²⁰ To be healed, in this specific case, equals being consoled.

In the past few years, it has struck me on several occasions that, both in reviews of books and in everyday conversations with both specialist and 'amateur' readers, the suggestion that a book can and does offer consolation occurs with surprising and increasing regularity. More often than not, the suggestion serves not just as a signal of the specific effect that books can have on readers and reviewers, but also as a signal of the quality of these books. A novel is often said to be great *because* it brings comfort. Conversely, the power to bring comfort is increasingly seen as one of the prime effects (and, indeed, tasks) of good literature. I will limit myself to one example here, because it brings together several of the arguments that we will have occasion to deal with more extensively in the remainder of this book. Reviewing *Zero K*, Don DeLillo's 2016 novel, for the *New York Times*, Joshua Ferris praised the author's novelistic output by pointing out the unique consolatory force of his books. 'Don DeLillo's novels generally offer consolation simply by enacting so well the mystery and awe of the real world', Ferris claims, 'by probing deeply and mystically into so much, and by offering the pleasures of his unique style'.²¹ As will become clearer later, literary solace is no less a matter of an author's stylistic and formal prowess than of the specific moral depth of their worldview.

In a survey article that was published on the website of *Times Higher Education* and that deals with what its author calls 'the rise of the medical humanities', Belinda Jack refers in a central paragraph of her text – one in which she tries to elaborate on what she sees as a 'less obvious role' for poetry to play in the disciplinary field of the medical humanities – to the power of poems to 'console, teach, amuse, enlighten, mimic, disconcert and so much more'.²² What is

striking in this list of poetry's tasks is not so much the presence of that first verb, but the fact that Jack puts it there first, as the indication of poetry's foremost goal, so to speak, one that comes before the double Horatian imperative of teaching (*docere*) and amusement (*delectare*), the classical mixture of what is useful with what is pleasant. In the same paragraph, Jack further elaborates on what she sees as the specific consolatory function of poems. She does so primarily (and not entirely unexpectedly, of course) by referring to the public use of poems at funeral services. There, poems serve as individual and collective occasions for all of those present, so that, in Jack's words, '[e]ach of us can ponder what the poem conjures for us, bringing something felt into clearer and thus more comforting focus. Often the poem will be one that allows us to reconsider the absolute nature of death.' In other words: the comfort that the poem brings resides in the fact ('thus' being the signal of that specific causal relationship) that the poem's language and formal make-up allow us to see and understand more clearly something that we have been knowing and feeling all along (ideas about the absolute and inevitable nature of mortality), something that marks us as individuals, but which at the same time binds us together, collectively.

The poet Don Paterson, in his preface to the *Picador Book of Funeral Poems* that he edited, describes the consolation provided by this type of poem in strikingly similar terms. Paterson also singles out the specific consolatory function of quite a significant and representative group of poems as their prime goal. This is how he puts it:

In our deepest grief we turn instinctively to poetry – to comfort and solace us, or to reflect our grief, give it proper public expression, or help us feel less alone in our experience of it. These poems [the ones in Paterson's collection], drawn from many different ages and cultures, remind us that the experience of parting is a timelessly human one: however lonely the loss of someone close might leave us, our mourning is also something that deeply unites us.²³

Paterson's reflections on the principle of solidarity that underlies the central mechanism involved in the giving and receiving of solace (in order to feel comforted we need to feel understood, that is, we need to get the feeling that our comforters understand our suffering for what it is, so that they can properly share in it) find an echo in Belinda Jack's analysis of the consolatory force of funeral poems: 'Faced with some of life's most painful moments poetry can reassure us that we

are not alone – others have suffered too.’ A further truism implied by the solidarity of solace is the assertion that our own experiences may become more meaningful when we come to understand them through the experience of another. The feeling of comfort very often arrives when we begin to properly understand our pain – at a distance, as it were, the distance provided by someone else’s perspective.

Some Preliminary Examples

Katharine Smyth on Virginia Woolf provides good illustrative backing. What Smyth learns from *To the Lighthouse* cannot follow from a plain and full identification with either Woolf or the novel’s narrator. The solace of reading that she experiences requires a more nuanced bifocal perspective that allows her to see both differences and similarities between her own situation (her struggle, first with her father’s alcoholism and then with his death) and the differently similar situations in which the author and protagonists of *To the Lighthouse* find themselves – Woolf losing both her parents at a young age and Mrs Ramsay’s children losing their mother in the course of the novel’s narrative. Whenever Smyth relates a passage from the novel (or from Woolf’s biography for that matter) to her own life story, she does so with a clear awareness of the dual ratio that lies behind what I just labelled a bifocal perspective – things are similar though different, and therein, precisely, lies the consolatory effect of her new and better understanding of the novel. ‘Such is the nature of Woolfian failure’, Smyth writes at one point, ‘which, despite my urge to conflate them, turns out to be a different breed from my father’s own’.²⁴ Smyth is always on the outlook for possibilities of identification, be it with the author or one of the novel’s protagonists – ‘I longed for Woolf’s genius, yes, but I also longed for Mrs Ramsay herself, for her as my mother, for her as my friend; I wanted to *be* her’²⁵ – and comes to realise that more is to be learned (and more comfort to be had) from a reading that encourages further reflection on the difference between what we read and who we are. In that difference – in the very possibility of difference – the experience of consolation can come into being.

The ultimate solace of *To the Lighthouse*, in Smyth’s experience, is related to a crucial insight that Woolf, almost in passing, visits on one of the novel’s protagonists, James Ramsay, who begins to learn that all things in life (objects as much people) refuse to be given a single meaning: ‘For nothing was simply one thing’, the young man comes to

realise at one point.²⁶ Smyth herself, re-reading Woolf's novel, comes to understand that its prime contribution lies in the fact that it makes clear to the reader (to this particular reader, at least) what she calls 'the complexities and contradictions of human experience'.²⁷ 'It was Woolf's genius', Smyth concludes, 'to express this richness, to never gloss over intricacy or inconsistency, to communicate through her characters her ongoing struggle to find truth and meaning in a world where both are infinitely shifting.'²⁸ The fact that meaning does have the potential to shift (and, indeed, the habit of shifting) is what brings comfort in times of grief and pain: the awareness that what ails us bitterly can be seen differently, from another perspective. Coupled to that essential insight, in Smyth's experience, is the no less consoling thought that readers of Woolf's novel find themselves not to be lone sufferers – 'the deliciousness of feeling known and understood'²⁹ is how Smyth labels this special feeling that readers of novels, judging by the examples of the books that I mentioned earlier, often get more easily from the books they read than from their relatives or friends. 'No book has ever given me a look up and down and said, "You look better"', Laura Freeman writes in her bibliotherapeutic account of her struggle with anorexia: 'I always took this badly. "You're looking better" to me meant: "You're definitely fatter."'³⁰

Writing about her own discovery of Woolf's work, Freeman concurs with Smyth's account of the particular – and particularly personal – bond readers can have with their cherished books: 'Here – and what a deliverance it was to discover her – was a writer who allowed me to say, not that I was not mad, for I felt very mad indeed at the time, but that I was not the only one.'³¹ Solace, as we will see later, is related – in ways that need to be further probed – to solidarity, to the feeling that our grief can genuinely be shared with others and, by consequence, also alleviated. One further aspect singled out by Katharine Smyth in her analysis of the comfort that she derives from reading Woolf has to do with the aesthetics of the work of literature. As we will also see in the remainder of this book, there seems to be a fundamental link between the experiences of consolation and of beauty. '[A]t the very moment I believed my father to be dying', Smyth writes, 'my mind alighted, quite involuntarily, upon the pages of my favourite novel, taking solace not just in its lessons but its language, in the rhythm and beauty of phrases as familiar to me as the sound of the waves that break in Rhode Island'.³² Bibliotherapeutic reflections of all kinds – whether in scholarly reports, non-academic essays or even in readers' comments on GoodReads or other bookish websites – draw the same conclusion at one point or another: the

comfort of literature lies not just in *what* is being said, but also (and more importantly) in *how* things are being said.

Literary comfort, of course, comes in different forms and shapes and its effects are unpredictable. In this, it works (or not, as the case may be) like any other type of comfort. The book that almost single-handedly put bibliotherapy high on the agenda of literary studies – Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin's *The Novel Cure: An A–Z of Literary Remedies* – offers further proof of the critical equation between the healing potential of literature and its consolatory powers. Originally published in English in 2013, *The Novel Cure* now has editions in several major languages: I have found references to French, Italian, Spanish, German, Turkish, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese and Dutch editions. Most of these are more than simply translations of the English original. They also contain new 'literary prescriptions' based on novels in the respective editions' target languages. What Berthoud and Elderkin do in *The Novel Cure* is offer reading suggestions of novels for readers suffering from a wide array of possible complaints, verging from moderately innocent forms of mental discomfort (not being able to 'find a decent cup of coffee', for instance, or 'not knowing what novels to take on holiday') to grief caused by a broken heart or the death of a loved one. In the latter case, readers are advised to read John Berger's *Here Is Where We Meet*. Those suffering from one or other form of identity crisis, Berthoud and Elderkin further claim, should definitely have a look at Kafka's 'Die Verwandlung' ('The Metamorphosis'), while readers who complain about insomnia or depression are offered an undosed prescription of Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, respectively.

In an interesting analysis of *The Novel Cure*, Josie Billington labelled Berthoud and Elderkin's approach as a 'half-joking' one.³³ The qualification is quite apt, I feel. The book, not unlike some others in the list that I started out with, is openly self-ironic about the presumed healing powers of literary writings. Of course, readers who pay a visit to the book doctor know very well that reading *Jane Eyre* will not really mend their broken hearts. And yet, when pressed on the issue, those same readers generally admit that they remain convinced of the curative powers of reading good literature. 'The Reading Cure will speak to anyone who has ever felt pain and found solace in a book' reads one of the endorsements on Laura Freeman's memoir. What is it exactly that readers find so consoling in specific texts? And what does this say about their ideas about literature, or about consolation, for that matter?

In the brief preface to their book, a mere one-and-a-half pages long, Berthoud and Elderkin immediately admit that the ‘cure’ of their book’s title is obviously not a real medicinal remedy. Interestingly, for our purposes, the word ‘consolation’ is invoked quite rapidly. It is mentioned in a paragraph in which Berthoud and Elderkin describe the effects of the literary prescriptions that the book as a whole lists: ‘Whatever your ailment,’ they assure us, in the parlance of real doctors, ‘our prescriptions are simple: a novel (or two), to be read at regular intervals. Some treatments will lead to a complete cure. Others will simply offer solace, showing you that you are not alone. All will offer the temporary relief of your symptoms due to the power of literature to distract and transport.’³⁴ The logic of the passage is quite straightforward: the fact that literature ‘simply’ provides comfort – and the sort of comfort that it provides – is coupled with the literary text’s power ‘to distract and transport’ us, rather than confront us with an absolute and threatening reality. Judging on several of the literary prescriptions that *The Novel Cure* offers, it would not be a farfetched idea to suggest that the literary solace that Berthoud and Elderkin are thinking of can be seen as a form of escapism, one which, however, procures the same effect as the funeral poems that both Belinda Jack and Don Paterson write about – the solace is a shared one, it results in the comforting thought ‘that you are not alone’.

Towards a Topology of Literary Comfort

The function of objects of art to console is also conspicuously present in *Art as Therapy* by John Armstrong and Alain de Botton, in the context of whose School of Thought the editors of *The Novel Cure* give actual sessions in bibliotherapy. In their introduction to the co-authored book, De Botton and Armstrong write: ‘This book proposes that art (a category that includes works of design, architecture and craft) is a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves.’³⁵ What I’m interested in, in the remainder of this book, are questions that seem of lesser concern to the authors of *Art as Therapy* and *The Novel Cure* and that probe issues that seem to be taken as self-evident by them: what is it, exactly, that we mean if we say – as they do, like many other readers, reviewers, authors and critics nowadays – that art consoles? What is this consolation by a work of art or by a fictional character? Why do we allow ourselves to be

comforted by fictional characters when in real life we find it hard to be consoled by the words and deeds of those surrounding us? In what does this fictional consolation consist precisely? Is it related to art's power to confront us with the real or to its power to help us escape from it? What is it exactly in these works that consoles us? Does the beauty of the work of art, its formal shape, have anything to do with this, and if so, to what extent and on the basis of which textual and affective mechanisms? How, to come back to the sentence that I just quoted from De Botton and Armstrong, is a consoled person a better version of themselves, especially a person who allows themselves to be consoled by a work of art?

I admit from the onset that these questions are too broad and general to be answered in a satisfactory way. As we will see, there is no single answer to the question of what, precisely, literary comfort boils down to. Also, it would be counter-intuitive, to say the least, to hope for such a single, homogeneous answer. Having described, with Katharine Smyth and *To the Lighthouse's* James Ramsay, the experience of consolation as one that makes clear to us that 'nothing [is] simply one thing', it would make little sense to see that very thing as 'simply one'. Nevertheless, it is my intention in what follows to provide a systematic analysis of the arguments that have been used and are still being used in discussions surrounding the consolatory potential of literary writings. As I hope to show, these arguments are historically motivated and structurally related. It is my conviction that an analysis of their relatedness – historically as well as conceptually – will result in a better understanding of what it is that books do when we say, intuitively, that they bring comfort, or that we find ourselves consoled by them.

The idea that literary texts can be a source of consolation for those reading them is a founding topic in the history of Western literature, as I want to show in the remainder of this book. From the very beginning, the therapeutic effect of literary writings has been defined in terms of their consolatory force. This is still the case today, increasingly so even, as I just made clear. Numerous are the references to the comforting potential of literature, both in popular forms of criticism and in scholarly explorations of the values of reading. By focusing on a number of significant moments in the interlocking histories of the book's two central concepts, I want to open up the critical topos of 'literary consolation' so that readers can become aware of the premises that underlie the assumption that literary writings can bring comfort. What exactly do we mean when we make this often heard claim? What is it in literary texts that provides this

special experience and how does the comfort that we derive from reading literary texts differ from other types of consolation? Conversely, how does literature (fiction?) help us to understand what consolation means and what effects it has? While this book does not pretend to offer a full historical trajectory of the inter-relationships between literature and consolation, it does take a historical perspective. Both 'literature' and 'consolation' are notions the meaning of which changes over the centuries (in the latter case even quite drastically). My historicist perspective, however, remains focused on the present. By looking at a number of significant moments where the histories of the book's two central concepts intersect (from Homer, through Dante, Shakespeare and Flaubert, to Woolf and more recent authors), I want to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and values of literature and consolation today. (That is why, in the first four chapters, my historically inspired reflection on the texts at hand is related to a recent publication in which those texts are the occasion of a contemporary bibliotherapeutic reflection.)

The central argument of this book is that the histories of literature and consolation are mutually illuminating. I want to argue that we will understand the peculiar phenomenon of bibliotherapy better if we manage to grasp more fully the inter-relationships between the history of literature and the history of consolation. The two *Begriffsgeschichten*, and their numerous intersections, will be the central subject of the book. As I want to show in the course of this book, the grand narrative of the topos of 'literary comfort' is defined, from its beginning, by the inter-relationship of two extreme positions, which are opposed but historically related to each other: either it is argued that texts that are literary are meant to give comfort and that they are successful in doing so, or these texts are being derided because they cannot provide real consolation. Picking up on the medical metaphors that are central to the practice of bibliotherapy, one could say that literary writings as purveyors or mediators of consolation can be considered a *pharmakon* in the two oppositional meanings which Derrida reminded us are inherent in the original Greek word: they work as either true medicine or mere poison – they either offer the authentic insight of real consolation or its counter-productive variant, the illusion of comfort.³⁶

As I hope to make clear in the chapters that follow, there are two reasons why these two positions are generally co-present (albeit in varying degrees of dominance and subordination) in most discussions that centre around the consolatory potential of literary writings – as

indeed they seem to be in *The Novel Cure*. The first one, *pace* Derrida, is that literary comfort – the consolation provided by literary texts – is the outcome of writing, the prime *pharmakon* as the author of ‘La pharmacie de Platon’ has argued. Writing, in its capacity of remedy/poison, is characterised by an ambiguity that is not only unsettling, but also cannot be settled – it either delivers its promise to bring comfort or undermines that very promise by the simple act of making it. The second reason has to do with the fact that the specific samples of writing that I will discuss in the remainder of this book are implicated in two conceptual histories: that of ‘literature’ and that of ‘consolation’. The two concepts undergo significant semantic changes in the course of the centuries. In the case of the former, these changes will be self-evident to students of literature reading this book: the works of Homer (Chapter 1), Dante (Chapter 2), Shakespeare (Chapter 3) and Flaubert (Chapter 4) were produced in very different cultural circumstances, in which the pragmatics of the literary ‘text’ and the tasks of the ‘author’ producing those texts were conceived of in different and often mutually contradictory ways. To give just one example: for Dante, literature’s prime task was moral (i.e. religious) edification; for Flaubert, literature could serve no other cause than that of being a form of art. This basic difference in viewpoint with respect to the desired effect of literary writings will obviously play a role in discussions related to the question of literature’s consolatory power.

It may be less self-evident that our Western ideas of what consolation was and how it functioned also changed considerably over time. We all have intuitions about which thoughts are comforting and which are not, but it suffices to read a letter of consolation that was written centuries ago to see that these intuitions are not at all universal. In the chapters that follow I will be distinguishing, in broadly defined terms, between three different ‘regimes of consolation’ – a classical one (Chapter 1), a Christian one (Chapter 2), and a modern one (Chapters 3 to 6). In the classical era, as we will see in the first chapter of this book, the practice of consolation was generally defined in terms of an appeal to reason, an injunction to overcome one’s emotions, the excess of which was considered blinding: in a state of distress we no longer see the real for what it is, classical consolatory writings argue. In these texts, the logic of consolation aims for a decisive change of perspective, a return to the common sense: to be comforted involves being reminded of how things actually are. Parents who mourn the loss of a child, for instance, are urged to remember the way of all flesh and to find comfort in the happiness that the child brought before it passed away. In the Christian regime,

as we will see in the second chapter, the state of comfort is seen as the righteous outcome of authentic belief – the goal of the Christian regime was the acceptance of God’s providential design. However painful life on earth could be, mankind had to realise that it suffered for a just cause and that happiness awaited true believers in the after-life. Christian words and practices of consolation served as a reminder of that divinely ordained cause. If a young child was taken away, parents should come to understand – and find comfort in that understanding – that whatever happened did so because God willed it to happen.

In the modern era (Chapters 3 to 6), neither religious faith nor absolute belief in an unshakeable common rationality could continue to support the logic and rhetoric of consolation. Modern ideas of consolation are caught in the double-bind that is central to the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg’s analysis of the phenomenon: man is a creature in need of comfort, but in essence this need can never be truly quenched – *Trostbedürfnis* (the ‘need for comfort’) and *Untröstlichkeit* (the ‘impossibility of comfort’) are the joint keywords in Blumenberg’s analysis.³⁷ Modern reflections on comfort stress the difficulty of finding true comfort instead of the self-evident success of consolatory attempts that underlies the classical and Christian discourses on the topic. To be clear, the chapters that follow are not an attempt to analyse these different discursive regimes – had I wanted to do that, my focus would have been on texts other than the ones that are central to this book: not on literary writings, but on classical letters of consolation, for instance, or Christian treatises on spiritual comfort or older and more recent texts on philosophical and psychological aspects of consolation. My approach in what follows centres on literature because I want to find out how these specific writings – in their capacity of being literary, that is – represent, stage and reflect upon the phenomenon of consolation, either directly or by offering the reader room for that reflection. My ultimate aim is not a mere thematic one, as I hope to have made clear: in reading passages from texts by Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Flaubert and more recent authors, in which consolatory encounters occur (scenes of comfort one could call them) and in correlating these passages both to the historical development of the concept of consolation and to that of literature, I want to arrive at a better and more proper understanding of the complex interplay of the intuitions that sustain our conviction that reading literature brings comfort – intuitions about what consolation is and should be, about what literature is and should be, and about the relationship between the two.

Organisation of the Book

In the book's first three chapters, the identification of three successive 'regimes' of consolation – the classical, Christian and modern regimes – is related to the close reading of a number of scenes of comfort that I have taken from canonical texts which date from the respective periods: Homer's *Iliad*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and a number of plays by Shakespeare. Chapter 1 ('The Classical Regime of Literary Comfort: From Homer to Aristotle') begins by focusing on what I consider to be Western literature's first major scene of comfort: the scene, towards the end of *Iliad* 24, in which Priam is comforted for the loss of his son by Achilles, who was single-handedly responsible for the death of that son. Coupled to a scene from Sophocles' *Electra* where consolation is rejected rather than embraced, the fragment from Homer serves as the occasion for a survey of classical ideas of consolation. Having outlined the principles underlying that regime – to bring comfort is to appeal for reasonable thought and behaviour, in which the emotions are generally allowed to play a moderate part (*metriopatheia*); the logic of comfort is one of solidarity and common-sense thinking and it is a logic whose efficiency and success is presented as self-evident and unproblematic – I round off the chapter with a reflection on classical debates on the values and limits of literary representation. As soon as ideas on consolation move from the literary to the philosophical genre of the *consolatio*, the question becomes how the philosophical critique of the limits and powers of literary mimesis (in Plato and Aristotle, respectively) affects later ideas surrounding the critical topos of 'literary comfort'. Until now, I believe, discussions on the question have revolved around positions already announced in the classical period. If we want to argue that literature brings comfort to the extent that it can be shown to provide genuine insight into core experiences of our individual and collective being (a position close to Aristotle's analysis of *katharsis*), we need to be wary of the possibility that literature tells lies and results only in escapism (Plato's position).

The scene of comfort that is central to the first half of Chapter 2 ('The Christian Regime of Literary Comfort: From Boethius to Dante') is the famous opening scene of Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae*. In it, the Muses of Poetry are shooed away from the narrator's sickbed by Lady Philosophy. Poetic comfort, the scene seems to suggest, will never turn out to be effective, because it is ultimately self-deceptive. Opposed to philosophy proper, poetry is false medicine: because the

Muses of Poetry both target and feed on the prisoner's emotions, his attachment to them is bound to keep him sick, Lady Philosophy keeps claiming in the text's opening scene. In its entirety, though, Boethius' text offers a much more complex reflection on the healing comfort of literature. In her apology for philosophy, as we will see, Lady Philosophy makes use of so many literary tropes and techniques, inserting numerous references to literary writings, that it becomes impossible to take her critique of poetry at face value. As I want to show, the critique of poetry in Boethius' text gradually develops into an apology for a specific type of poetry, a species of literature that belongs to the domain of moral philosophy and has a positive consolatory effect on its readers, provided that it is being read properly – the sort of poetry, in other words, for which Dante continued to plea throughout his œuvre.

In the second part of my second chapter, I want to argue that the discovery of Boethius' text helped Dante in his lifelong search for a form of poetry that could become truly, that is, positively, consolatory. This development begins with the early intuition in the *Vita Nuova* that the poet should be able to find, as he puts it in Chapter 31 of his text, 'solace in sorrowful words'. It moves on to an important reflection that turns this intuition into a fully-fledged theoretical programme in the second book of the *Convivio*, where Boethius' example (together with that of Cicero) seems to inspire a form a writing that couples a 'sweet' rhetoric (*dolcezza*) to the production of true meaning under the guise of fiction. The theory of *Convivio* culminates in the consolatory poetry of the *Commedia*. More explicitly than Boethius' treatise, as we will see, Dante's poetry is steeped in the Christian regime of consolation. In that new regime, several guiding classical ideas of consolation return, but the overarching framework of the Christian religion offers a new foundation to consolatory arguments: our suffering is willed by God, a sign of His grace in anticipation of our final salvation.

In Chapter 3 ('Towards a Modern Regime of Literary Comfort: Shakespeare and the Failure to Console'), I discuss several scenes of comfort in five different plays by Shakespeare's plays. The scenes have one thing in common: in each of them, the practice of consolation fails. I take this failure to be representative of the modern regime of consolation. The scenes that I have selected come from *Hamlet*, *Richard II*, *Measure for Measure*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*. In discussing them together, I want to point out how Shakespeare's understanding of comfort is based on a thorough knowledge of the classical theories that were highlighted in my first chapter. But while in those theories it is taken for granted that the practice of comfort is always

successful, Shakespeare shows us the failure of consolation. This failure, as I see it, is related to a heightened awareness of the duplicity of rhetoric and to the new, early modern understanding of the individual self. Shakespeare's characters fail to be comforted because they are no longer convinced that their inner experiences relate unproblematically to the common sense upon which theories of comfort were traditionally founded. Inconsolable characters like Hamlet and Queen Isabel (in *Richard II*) fail to feel like everybody else, which is, basically, what people who are being comforted are expected to do. Also, the Christian rhetoric of consolation that is central to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to numerous early modern consolatory writings (Catholic as well as Protestant) is either absent in Shakespeare's scenes of comfort (as in *Hamlet*, for instance), or exposed as blatant lies (in *Measure for Measure* and in *Romeo and Juliet*). As I want to argue, Shakespeare's analysis of the failure of comfort is indicative of the modern regime of consolation, in which the difficulty and ultimate 'impossibility' of consolation (Blumenberg) are central.

Chapters 4 to 6 pursue the relationship of literature to the modern regime of consolation. From Dante to Shakespeare, we move from an aesthetics that considers good literature to be consolatory per se (Dante) to one that conceives of the artist's task as one of testing the limits of that ideal, and in doing so, exposing the possible failure of the moral good (Shakespeare). In Chapter 4 ('The Religion of Despair: Gustave Flaubert and George Sand on Reading and Writing') these two positions are the subject of an epistolary discussion between Gustave Flaubert and his friend George Sand. As Flaubert sees it, the chief aim of literary writing is not 'consolation' but 'desolation'. Real writers, Flaubert argues, should refrain from wanting to provide their readers with the sort of moral comfort that Sand still considers central to their task; they will instead confront their readers with reality as it is, desolate and cruel. While Sand sees it as her main task to make her readers happy and colour over the world with the hue of comfort, Flaubert wants to open his readers' eyes and show them how things really stand. The discussion between Flaubert and Sand not only revolves around the function of literature, it also brings into play the discussion of what consolation is meant to do: is it meant to show things as they really are and to confront the person in need of consolation with a state of affairs that is the cause of pain or sorrow, or is it meant to embellish this state of affairs and show the person in need of comfort that things are not as bad as they think they are?

The irony of Flaubert's scathing critique of what Sand called 'literature of consolation' is that his own work soon came to be

seen as itself an example of false comfort. I begin Chapter 5 ('Novels of Comfort: Woolf, Winnicott and the Work of Consolation') by addressing the fact that, with specific respect to the question of literary consolation, Flaubert's call for an autonomous consideration of literature resulted in the critique that in the modernist tradition that his work opened up, style began to function as what David James calls 'an aesthetic salve'. In his recently published *Discrepant Solace* (2019), James deals with the work of a number of contemporary Anglophone writers (Ian McEwan, J. M. Coetzee, Marilynne Robinson, Joan Didion, . . .) who want to move beyond that critique and come up with a form of writing that questions, thematically as well as stylistically, the idea of consolation as necessarily soothing. James' thorough analysis of these writers' contribution to the historiography of literary consolation enables me to query the function of form in discussions of the healing power of literary writings. My case is Virginia Woolf, whose *To the Lighthouse* is the book that is central in Katharine Smyth's particularly interesting bibliotherapeutic memoir that I discuss more extensively in this chapter. My discussion of it results in an exploration of the idea that in bibliotherapy, books function as what the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls 'transitional objects'.

In my final chapter ('Fragments of a Consolatory Discourse: Sontag, Riley, Proust, Barthes'), I relate French philosopher Michaël Fœssel's analysis of the language of consolation – in a work that has been an important companion in the course of the writing of this book – to the question that underlies every bibliotherapeutic claim. If literature, as that claim goes, has healing powers (powers of comfort, in my reading of that curative potential), what is it in their specific use of language that sustains or even makes up that power? Starting from qualities of the discourse of consolation singled out by Fœssel, I have organised Chapter 6 around the examples of the inconsolable Susan Sontag, Denise Riley's analysis of the time of mourning and Proust's insights in the pleasures of solitary reading. My final (though in no way conclusive) case is the one that started me off on this project: Roland Barthes' brief reflections on the consolation of reading in the texts that serve as a lasting tribute to his mother, *Mourning Diary* and *Camera Lucida*.

As I have mentioned, the historical reflection that this book has to offer on the development of the critical topos of literary comfort is targeted to the present. My central question, throughout, is where our current (and currently fashionable) intuition that literature has the power to console comes from – by which historically determined ideas about literature and consolation (and the relationship between

them) it is underpinned and shaped. In order to highlight the presentist nature of my historicist pursuit, I have included in each of the book's chapters a reflection on recent works that take as their central topic the healing or consolatory power of the work of the canonical authors that I deal with in these chapters. Whether it be a professor of literature working on Homer or Dante (Daniel Mendelsohn and Joseph Luzzi in Chapters 1 and 2), a murder convict reading Shakespeare (Larry Newton in Chapter 3), a retired doctor with a strange obsession for Flaubert (Julian Barnes' Geoffrey Braithwaite in Chapter 4) or a young woman mourning the loss of her father while reading Woolf (Katharine Smyth in Chapter 5), each of these readers serves as a convincing witness of the consolatory powers that we attribute to the literary writings that many of us continue to cherish so deeply.

Notes

1. Carson, *Nox*, n.p.
2. Dreher, *How Dante Can Save Your Life*; Smith, *Jane Austen's Guide to Modern Life's Dilemmas*; Detambel, *Les livres prennent soin de nous*; Gerke, *Lesen als Medizin*; Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*; Newman, *The Western Lit Survival Kit*; Schwalbe, *The End of Your Life Book Club*; Shields, *How Literature Saved My Life*; Golomb, *Petit guide de lectures qui aident à vivre*; Kästner, *Doktor Erich Kästners Lyrische Hausapotheke*.
3. Groskopf, *The Anna Karenina Fix*; Sieghart, *The Poetry Pharmacy*; Sieghart, *The Poetry Pharmacy Returns*; Freeman, *The Reading Cure*; McGirr, *Books that Saved my Life*; Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*.
4. Campbell, *Weird Things Customers Say in Bookshops*; Campbell, *The Bookshop Book*; Borsuk, *The Book*; Price, *Unpacking my Library*; *The Book Lovers' Anthology*.
5. For a good survey of the history and theories of bibliotherapy, see the contributions to the first section of Sarah McNicol and Liz Brewster (eds), *Bibliotherapy*. An important recent survey of theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between books and issues of mental wellbeing can be found in Josie Billington (ed.), *Reading and Mental Health*.
6. Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window*, 278n52.
7. Quoted in Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie*, 12.
8. Tukhareli, *Healing Through Books*.
9. Tukhareli, 'Bibliotherapy-based Wellness Program for Healthcare Providers', 44.

10. Stanley, *Reading to Heal*, 3. Andrea Gerk cites a German medical dictionary in defining bibliotherapy as 'Form der Psychotherapie, bei der der Pat. durch die Lektüre einer gezielten Auswahl geeigneter Literatur darin unterstützt werden soll, seine Probleme zu verbalisieren, klarer zu reflektieren u. evtl. Die Begrifflichkeit des Therapeuten besser zu verstehen.' ['Type of psychotherapy in which patients are prescribed a specific selection of literary sources, the reading of which is meant to support their attempts to articulate personal problems and reflect more clearly on them. A further intended outcome is the improved understanding of the therapist's practice.'] Gerk, *Lesen als Medizin*, 91, my translation.
11. Bonnet, *La bibliothérapie en médecine générale*, 20.
12. McChord Crothers, 'A Literary Clinic'.
13. McChord Crothers, 'A Literary Clinic', 291.
14. McChord Crothers, 'A Literary Clinic', 292.
15. McChord Crothers, 'A Literary Clinic', 292–3.
16. Sieghart, *The Poetry Pharmacy*, xvii.
17. Freeman, *The Reading Cure*, 14.
18. Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie*, 11–17.
19. Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie*, 12–13. See also Pietrobelli, 'Soigner par les lettres'.
20. Tukhareli, *Healing Through Books*, i.
21. Ferris, review of Don DeLillo, *Zero K*.
22. Jack, 'The Rise of the Medical Humanities'.
23. Paterson (ed.), *The Picador Book of Funeral Poems*, xiii.
24. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 114.
25. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 67.
26. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 89.
27. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 89.
28. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 89.
29. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 186.
30. Freeman, *The Reading Cure*, 29.
31. Freeman, *The Reading Cure*, 129.
32. Smyth, *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, 186–7.
33. Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, 105.
34. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 2.
35. De Botton and Armstrong, *Art As Therapy*, 5.
36. Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon'.
37. Blumenberg, 'Trostbedürfnis und Untröstlichkeit des Menschen'.