

Torsten Caeners

## Poetry as Therapy

Contemporary Literary Theory as a Foundation  
of Poetry Therapy

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## Acknowledgements

As with most books, this one began as a promising but vague idea, a train of thoughts revolving around poetry and therapy, and the question of their mutual interrelation and interaction. Looking more deeply into the matter, I discovered the interdisciplinary approach of poetry therapy as an already existing therapeutic method and practice. My next step was to do more research into poetry therapy as an institutionalised discipline, especially in the USA. It became clear that the poetic aspect was underdeveloped and, sometimes, even underappreciated in Poetry Therapy circles. With the agenda to remedy this and approach Poetry Therapy from a literary perspective, I began in earnest to write this study, the completion of which would not have been possible without the assistance, support and goodwill of a lot of people. I want to thank all of them. Those not mentioned by name know how much I appreciate their support and help.

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## Introduction

Poetry is a natural medicine; it's like a homeopathic tincture derived from the stuff of life itself – *your experience*. Poems distill experience into the essentials. Our personal experiences touch the common ground we share with others. The exciting part of this process is that poetry used in this healing way helps people integrate the disparate, even fragmented parts of their life. Poetic essences of sound, metaphor, image, feeling and rhythm act as remedies that can elegantly strengthen our whole system – physical, mental and spiritual. (Fox 3; emphasis original)

Fox's above statements about poetry, its therapeutic value and applicability contain all the fundamental aspects of what poetry therapy is and, also, what remains unfulfilled in the promise of the concept. Indeed, poetry is "natural medicine" in the sense that the activity of writing poetry is conducive to stress release, self-reflexivity and contemplation. One need only consider the activity of writing a diary to understand that writing down one's own experiences in life is a means of organising and coming to terms with them. Poetry can increase this inherently therapeutic potential of writing as it "distill[s] experience into the essentials" – it is condensed language which holds valuable therapeutic potential to be released. Poetry has been used therapeutically and has been recognised as a means of healing throughout history. These roots extend as far back as pre-historical, shamanistic practices. In antiquity, the therapeutic potential of poetry was common knowledge: "[i]n ancient times, Greek libraries were designated as healing places of the soul, and Greek tragic theatre was viewed as cathartic for the entire community. King David sang psalms to comfort Saul and the ancient poets were recognized as shamans and healers in various cultures" (Chavis/Weisberger 1). There is thus a long tradition that links poetry to therapeutic effects. This potential for healing inherent in poetry can be utilised more effectively if combined with psychotherapeutic techniques. This is the fundamental idea behind the concept of poetry therapy. Simple as this may appear at first glance, there are certain aspects that need to be kept in mind when thinking of poetry and therapy in a modern, psychotherapeutic sense.

Firstly, there has to be serious doubt as to whether poetry therapy currently exists at all as a discernible discipline. Although art therapies have gained ground in recent decades and have become an accepted form of therapy, they do remain ancillary in many cases. Considering that poetry therapy constitutes a minor and relatively underrepresented discipline within the art therapies themselves, it becomes obvious that it is the more difficult to establish it as an independent and accepted discipline among other forms of psychotherapy.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, there is the inherent interdisciplinarity of

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term psychotherapy generically to include all forms and schools of mental health therapy. Although I will implicitly concentrate on psychoanalysis of the Freudian

poetry therapy. Poetry therapy consists of ‘poetry’ and ‘therapy’, and in order to function smoothly and effectively, it has to be aware of and take into consideration its dual character. Poetry therapy has to recognise its interdisciplinary nature and take it seriously. It is true that poetry as such is already therapeutical, but it needs a sound psychotherapeutical framework to be truly effective.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, an intimate knowledge of poetry is indispensable to its application in psychotherapy. Without an in-depth understanding of its diverse forms and mechanisms, poetry cannot become an integral part of the therapeutic process. Being an interdisciplinary endeavour, poetry therapy requires disciplinary competences in order to be effective; this is required not only to achieve a maximum of therapeutic effectiveness, but also to safeguard the practice against dilettantism and amateurishness. Poetry therapy does have a sound and functioning psychotherapeutic framework and basis; this, however, has resulted in denigration or even subjugation of the poetry aspect. Consequently, only the latter is in need of a theoretical foundation. As a literary scholar, it is precisely this foundation that I intend to provide with this study. At the same time, since I am a literary scholar rather than a trained psychotherapist, I do not presume to evaluate the psychotherapeutic aspects of poetry therapy. As already noted: there is nothing wrong or theoretically unfounded with the psychotherapeutic side of poetry therapy, and the problem clearly lies in the discipline’s lack of knowledge of poetry. Still, I cannot enter into a discussion of poetry therapy without commenting upon and dealing with these psychotherapeutic aspects. Therefore, in those cases that deal critically with aspects, methods and theories from psychotherapy, I do so only with reference to and within the context of poetry therapy. More precisely, my comments on psychotherapeutic methods and theories are directed towards the implications these notions have within and on the relationship between therapy and poetry, and within the agenda of establishing a balanced interdisciplinarity in poetry therapy. Since poetry therapists are well-trained in the therapeutic side, but frequently lack a sound understanding of poetry, this study will provide the necessary theoretical foundation by appropriating post-structuralist literary (theoretical) concepts for poetry therapy. That this cannot be done without recourse to psychotherapeutic notions and theories goes without saying. However, my focus will be on the literary side, and the concepts discussed in the following chapters (and this includes psychotherapeutic concepts) are evaluated from a literary perspective alone. When I thus speak of ‘effects’, ‘therapeutic effectiveness’ and the like, I do so with regard to the possibilities of enhancing the effectiveness by the application of literary and poetic theories. I do not wish to insinuate that psychotherapeutic methods and practices lack effectiveness or efficiency, but that a joint and well-founded application of literary and psychotherapeutic methods and theories can increase the effectiveness of poetry therapy as an interdisciplinary approach.

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school via Lacan, the arguments are taken to be valid for all psychotherapeutic approaches.

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, this is a prerequisite for being integrated into and taken seriously by the institutionalised forms of psychotherapy.

As was already hinted at before, the current problem of the discipline lies in the failure to recognize and realise poetry therapy's interdisciplinarity in theory and practice: the interdisciplinary nature of poetry therapy, while widely acknowledged in theory, has for the most part remained unrealised in practice. Also, in those cases in which this has indeed been recognised, it is being given little more than lip service. Poetry therapists, more often than not, are therapists with a superficial knowledge of poetry or literature: “few [art therapists] accentuate their greatest strength, the thing that makes them different, their expertise in their art form. It is little wonder that despite many protestations to the contrary, creative therapy remains firmly under the grip of the medical community” (Warren 5). There is nothing fundamentally wrong with conducting and organising poetry therapy under the auspices of the medical community. In fact, it is hardly possible to do otherwise given the institutional structures in contemporary society. It is, however, a mistake not to balance medical and artistic procedures and practices. Unfortunately, it is precisely this balance that is lacking in contemporary poetry therapy. Poetry therapy as it presents itself today largely leaves untapped the one resource that “makes [it] different” from the rest of the therapeutic community, namely the poem and the creative process. Poetry therapy either employs poetry purely receptively or the poem is taken as a facilitating tool only, utilised to open and guide the therapeutic discussion along more or less predetermined lines. In order to assert its independence from other therapeutic approaches and to take its own interdisciplinary nature seriously, poetry therapy has to take poetry seriously; its practitioners have to be as well ‘versed’ in poetry as in traditional therapeutic theory and practice.<sup>3</sup> This is not only a matter of untapped potential and reduced effectiveness, but may also be downright counterproductive to therapy. Hands-on “experience in [poetry therapy] situations has consistently suggested that enthusiasm and even love for poetry without the literary training needed to exploit this tool fully can be frustrating and sometimes counterproductive. I see the need for a systematic, organic

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<sup>3</sup> The lack of knowledge or disinterest of poetry therapists in poetry and literary studies can be glimpsed from the following quotation: “Herein lies the significant difference between the English class and the poetry therapy session: the first objective of the English class is to determine the poem’s meaning, of the poetry therapy session to seek the meaning that the poem has for the various members. There may be as many meanings as there are persons, and each meaning is valid in the context of the individual’s peculiar experiences” (Crootof 44). Crootof’s comment – albeit somewhat dated – suggests that literary studies are concerned with explicating some form of universal meaning from the poem. Nothing could be further from the truth. While literary studies strive towards interpretations that can be validated, this does not imply that there can be a reading of a work of literature which is true once and for all (for this dated view, cf., for instance, Hirsch’s “Objective Interpretation,” a source roughly contemporary with Crootof). Crootof’s understanding of the fundamental distinction between literary studies and poetry therapy is hence based on a misconception. This is only one case of many – Crootof’s understanding of literary studies being still predominant in the literature on poetry therapy today – and one can easily see how misconceptions of this kind can be disadvantageous to a discipline such as poetry therapy.

course of study in poetry for the therapeutic practitioner” (Jaskoski 77). Jaskoski’s point here is as simple as it is essential: poetry therapists need as solid a training in poetry as in psychotherapy. This insight is invaluable for poetry therapy and it is incomprehensible that it has fallen on such deaf ears. Jaskoski’s insight and its failed reception in the field of poetry therapy is the *raison d’être* for this study. It is precisely the lack of literary knowledge and training in poetry therapy that I seek to alleviate. Without this, poetry therapy’s two disciplines cannot come into balance and the therapeutic potential cannot be fully exploited. Moreover, any method or practice that is not fully understood inevitably produces effects which cannot be foreseen by its practitioners; more often than not, these effects have negative implications, or are at least disruptive to the activity in question. When it comes to psychotherapy, this is untenable as one is here concerned with the (mental) health of human beings. It is thus essential that research in poetry therapy is steered towards investigating contact areas of the two disciplines of literary studies, more specifically the study of poetry, and psychotherapy. Identifying such contact areas can make possible new and effective therapeutic approaches, approaches which duly consider the creative, poetic aspects of poetry therapy. By redirecting the focus of poetry therapy onto the poem and the process of poetic creation within the therapeutic context, poetry therapy can achieve a balance between its two fundamental disciplines.

Returning to Fox’s statement, one can isolate two essential features of poetry that pertain to its application in therapy. As Fox rightly states, the potential for healing in poetry is a “natural medicine” (3) that pertains to the “physical, mental and spiritual” (*ibid.*) realms (where “spiritual” is to denote the emotional world of the client<sup>4</sup> and not some esoteric sphere or ghostly realm). In simultaneously addressing these areas, poetry concerns the human being as a whole. Consequently, the understanding and treatment of human beings in the context of poetry therapy has to be a holistic endeavour. Both clients and their problems have to be perceived in the entire complexity of their socio-cultural embeddedness, in “the common ground we share with others” (Fox 3). These two fundamental aspects of poetry – its natural healing properties and its holistic effects – also constitute the greatest obstacles to a satisfactory realisation of poetry therapy in the therapeutic practice.

I will begin by surveying some of the implications of the first aspect isolated above, namely poetry as a “natural medicine.” Poetry’s natural healing properties are generously evoked in books and articles on poetry therapy; what is seldom mentioned, however, is that it is difficult to tap into these qualities within the constraints of a modern health care system. Generally, the institutionalisation and systematisation of and within the health care system of any modern, industrialised nation is counterproductive to art therapies and inevitably robs poetry therapy of much of its spontaneity: there are time constraints when it comes to the therapeutic sessions, for example, which hamper the flow of creativity necessary for poetry therapy to be effective. It is

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<sup>4</sup> In this study, the persons seeking psychotherapeutic help will not be designated as ‘patients’, but as ‘clients’ in order to underline their free choice of therapeutic participation.