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On Bibliotherapy: Literature as Therapy and the Problem of Autonomy, with Régine Detambel’s *Les Livres prennent soin de nous*

Abstract: I here give a reading of no doubt the most brazen case of the “care turn” this special issue takes as its subject. Régine Detambel is an author and bibliotherapist, and in *Les Livres prennent soin de nous* argues not only that literature can serve as therapy for its reader, but that the practice of bibliotherapy might help foster the autonomy of both patients and of literature. Drawing on work in the social sciences on matters of autonomy as it relates to both literature and contemporary therapeutic culture, I discuss how the various forms of autonomy Detambel sets out to uphold, far from harmoniously coinciding, contradict and conflict with one another. Finally, in the conclusion, I adopt a more openly contestational attitude, to challenge the notion that the value of literature is best defended through the bibliotherapeutic wedding of literature and therapy.

“Si ces jugements étaient vrais, il les faudrait malgré tout contester, car à les admettre, nous n’aurions plus de vie possible. ”

Georges Bataille, ‘Le Bonheur, l’érotisme et la littérature’ (1949)

Here I shall give a reading of doubtless the most brazen case of the “care turn” this special issue takes as its subject, and “la littérature rémédiatrice” described by Alexandre Gefen. Gefen argues the beginning of this century “a vu l’émergence d’une conception [...] ‘thérapeutique’ de l’écriture et de la lecture, celle d’une littérature qui guérit, qui soigne, qui aide, ou, du moins, qui ‘fait du bien.’”¹ As this quotation suggests, the spectrum of well-doing ambitioned by contemporary literature is a wide one – to care is not always to seek remedy. But in this “therapeutic” conception’s more forthright forms, literature is understood as, in Gefen’s words, “une médecine de l’âme” (p. 16).

Recent years have seen the publication in France of a bounty of mass-market non-fiction vaunting literature’s therapeutic powers: Stéphanie Janicot’s *100 romans de première urgence pour (presque) tout soigner* (2008), Christine Marcandier-Bry’s *Bon pour le moral: 40 livres pour se faire du bien!!!* (2010), Élodie Chaumette’s *Ces livres peuvent changer votre vie: 100 prescriptions de bibliothérapie* (2016), Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin’s *Remèdes littéraires: se soigner par les livres* (2016), and Eva Bester’s *Remèdes à la mélancolie: la consolation par les arts* (2016). But in the midst of this enthusiasm, Régine Detambel stands out as both herself a literary writer, and a bona fide walker of the bibliotherapeutic walk,

¹ Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde: la littérature française face au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Corti, 2017), pp. 9.

practising her preached approach with patients and training others to do the same.² Where other works tend in tone towards whimsy – some in listicle form, some front-covered with illustrations of vintage medicine bottles – Detambel’s *Les Livres prennent soin de nous* (2015) seems a more fervent, earnest attempt to merge literature with therapy.

Detambel is an extraordinarily prolific writer: she published her first three novels in 1990, and her output has proved similarly abundant since – 26 novels to date, and no less than 66 other books (shorter works of verse and prose, essays, *livres d’artistes*, and works for young audiences). Detambel is also a practising physiotherapist, a profession reflected in what she herself identifies as the major subject of her literary work, “le corps”.³ This theme of the body has indeed been the focus of much of the (limited) existing scholarship on Detambel.⁴

Les Livres prennent soin de nous itself has not yet been the subject of extended critical discussion. Gefen mentions it as a work in which we find vulgarized the idea of literature as a “médecine de l’âme” (p. 16). But as we shall see, Detambel’s understanding of literature’s therapeutic powers sets this “médecine de l’âme” in stark opposition to medicine *tout court*. Part of what I wish to show is that even here – in this most literal French exemplar of a contemporary “conception ‘thérapeutique’” of literature – there persists a friction between therapeutic purposiveness and literary gratuity. I shall do this through a focus on notions of autonomy laced through Detambel’s book, the ways in which her “bibliothérapie créative” is drummed as fostering autonomy. In her view, “Contre la passivité et la perte d’autonomie, la lecture est la reconquête d’une position de sujet”; but for Detambel, bibliotherapy is the answer not only to risks posed to the autonomy of subjects, but also that of literature itself – bibliotherapy is that “sur quoi miser pour sauver à la fois la littérature et nos têtes.”⁵ My reading – drawing on work in the social sciences on matters of autonomy as it relates to both literature and contemporary therapeutic culture – will consider the conceptual and rhetorical strategies Detambel employs to confront the twin jeopardies she sees facing literature and our heads; in so doing, I will discuss how the various forms of autonomy Detambel sets out to uphold, far from harmoniously coinciding, contradict and conflict with one another. Finally, in the conclusion, I will adopt a more openly contestational attitude, to challenge the notion that the value of literature is best defended through the bibliotherapeutic wedding of literature and therapy.

Against Prescription

For a writer with ambitions to present a therapeutic conception of literature, it is striking Detambel first frames her argument in opposition not to those *littéraires* that might spurn such

² Elderkin is also a published novelist, and with Berthoud offers bibliotherapy sessions in London at Alain de Botton’s School of Life; the latter has a Parisian branch, for now *sans* bibliotherapeutic services.

³ See “Entretien avec Régine Detambel du 26 mars 2011”, in Virginie Tahar, *La Fabrique oulipienne du récit: expérimentations et pratiques narratives depuis 1980* (Paris: Garnier, 2019), pp. 685–687 (p. 687).

⁴ See, for example, Marie-Claire Barnet, “Anatomical Writing: *Blasons du corps masculin*, *L’Écrivain* and *La Ligne âpre* by Régine Detambel”, in Gill Rye and Michael Worton (eds), *Women’s Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 93–105. On the role of the body in grief, see Kathryn Robson, “Virtual Reality: The Subject of Loss in Marie Darrieussecq’s *La Naissance des fantômes* and Régine Detambel’s *La Chambre d’écho*”, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41:1 (2004), 3–15. On the related theme of aging, see Cécilia Gil, “Écrire la vieillesse dans l’œuvre de Régine Detambel”, in Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (eds), *Aventures et expériences littéraires: écritures des femmes en France au début du vingt-et-unième siècle* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 195–211.

⁵ Régine Detambel, *Les Livres prennent soin de nous: pour une bibliothérapie créative* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2015), p. 28. Henceforth abbreviated as LP.

designs, but to contemporary therapeutic culture itself. On the second page, she gives a translation of the first dictionary definition of “bibliotherapy”, from the 1961 edition of the Webster International Dictionary: “La bibliothérapie est l’utilisation d’un ensemble de lectures sélectionnées en tant qu’outils thérapeutiques en médecine et en psychiatrie. Et un moyen de résoudre des problèmes personnels par l’intermédiaire d’une lecture dirigée” (LP, p. 10). The “selected reading material” need not be limited to or even include what we call “literature”; hence Detambel suggests we reserve “ce nom de bibliothérapie créative [...] à la seule pratique d’inspiration littéraire et artistique” (p. 58). She indeed defines “bibliothérapie créative” quite aggressively against the use of other kinds of books:

Pour la bibliothérapie en usage outre-Manche, l’œuvre de fiction [...] n’est pas la panacée; elle a même été oubliée, avec le dédain le plus insultant, comme un copeau, comme une mouche. Aux ouvrages de fiction, le *biblio-coach* semble préférer deux catégories de textes, assurément plus *manipulables* par des prescripteurs peu frottés à la bibliothèque: les livres de psychologie grand public, dont le contenu est en rapport avec la recherche d’un mieux-être [...]; et les livres dits “d’auto-traitement” (*self-help books*), inspirés des théories comportementales et cognitives (TCC), offrant une *méthode de travail précise* pour dissiper ses phobies, ses idées noires, ouvrages qui ont pour dessein de guider et d’encadrer le lecteur dans les actes de sa vie quotidienne, afin de l’aider dans un processus de changement comportemental et psychologique. (pp. 11–12; my emphases)

It is indeed true that, since 2005 in Wales and 2013 in England, GPs and other health professionals can prescribe self-help books.⁶ Nonetheless, by declining to mention, for example, Elderkin and Berthoud’s use of literary bibliotherapy in London, she is able more vividly to stage what is at stake, appealing to her French reader’s notion of France as *la République des Lettres*, at war with vulgar Anglo-Saxon empiricism.

Of interest to me here is Detambel’s vocabulary for characterizing pop psychology and self-help books, which by contrast reveals something of how she conceives of literature and literary bibliotherapy. These books offer a “*méthode de travail précise*” – and as we shall see, Detambel’s version of bibliotherapy deliberately avoids methodical precision. Moreover, in Detambel’s figuration, both the bibliotherapeutic text and patient are treated as objects by the health professional: the texts used are “manipulables” and “encadrent le lecteur”; the books are objects the scientists manipulate, and the books in turn place their reader within a very definite “frame” – while Detambel is interested in the literary work as something that cannot be “controlled”, and in casting the relationship between the reader and the literary text as involving no such delimitative duress.

The antithesis here sketched is pursued further in the next quotation:

L’une des raisons majeures pour lesquelles une certaine bibliothérapie ne souhaite pas travailler avec les fictions littéraires, c’est qu’un même titre ne produira pas les mêmes effets sur deux lecteurs différents... La non-reproductibilité des effets produits dissuade le scientifique d’administrer un principe actif aussi aléatoire.

⁶ For more on the “Reading Well: Books on Prescription” scheme, see the website of the Reading Agency, which delivers the scheme <<https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-well/>> [Accessed 24 January 2020].

Or, pour ces motifs précisément, je suis plutôt représentative d'une bibliothérapie littéraire, c'est-à-dire créative. (LP, p. 19)

Detambel first suggests "psychiatric bibliotherapy" struggles with the use of literary works because the effect any given work will have on any given reader is unpredictable (an unpredictability which prohibits its manipulation). But where this might be perceived by some as an obstacle to the therapeutic use of literature, for Detambel it is *precisely* this unpredictability, this non-manipulability which makes literature therapeutically valuable. A similar idea is reprised in the following series of rhetorical questions:

Est-ce vraiment au médecin que nous devons demander de nous expliquer l'art et la manière de nous servir des livres? Et peut-on penser que quelqu'un maîtrisera un jour l'effet d'un livre sur le lecteur? Doit-on ignorer que tout principe actif est à la fois remède et poison, et qu'un livre peut blesser effroyablement? (p. 26)

First: should we leave it to doctors to explain to us how to use art and literature? The emphasis in this first question is slightly different to that in the previous quotation: now it is not just that doctors are not *interested* in using literary works, but that we ought not to let them try. Then: could *anyone ever* master the impact of books on people? Here she returns to an idea of literature's essential unpredictability, an idea followed through into the third question – though now here, a text might not just help one reader and not another, but negatively impact, *horrendously wound* its reader. Detambel thus advocates embracing risk, the risk the patient might be negatively affected by the books she reads. Detambel pushes playing with fire – or poison, according to the metaphor she herself forwards here and elsewhere: "Un médecin [...] est bien loin de savoir manipuler [...] la bibliothèque, ses dangereux remous, ses poisons enivrants, ses baumes" (LP, p. 18).

The Poisonous History of Literary Autonomy

I would like to pause here for a moment on this poison metaphor, for it is one with echoes in the history of literature and its autonomization. I shall consider in this section where I see Detambel's bibliotherapeutic work sitting in that history, when she endows literature with something like a medical function while conceptually and rhetorically divvying creative bibliotherapy from medicine.

Gisèle Sapiro, building on Pierre Bourdieu's *Les Règles de l'art* in her history of ideas of writerly responsibility, has written of the poison metaphor's popularity in the nineteenth-century period of literature's autonomization; first during the Restoration when, "au nom de la liberté d'opinion, de la liberté de discussion, de la vérité, [...] les écrivains revendiquent leur autonomie face aux pouvoirs politiques et religieux"; then under the Second Empire, where "le combat se déplace vers l'affirmation de l'autonomie du jugement esthétique par rapport aux attentes morales et politiques, selon le modèle de l'artiste dégagé de toute contrainte sociale".⁷ At each stage, the poison metaphor is mobilized to warn against the risk literature poses to public morality. Monseigneur Frayssinous, for example, in his "Discours sur les livres irreligieux" published in 1826, speaks of "feuilles empestées" and "livres impies" whose

⁷ Gisèle Sapiro, *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain: littérature, droit et morale en France (XIX^e-XXI^e siècle)* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), pp. 29, 30.

nefarious effects French society has not yet fully confronted: “Nous ne craignons pas qu’imprégné de tous ces poisons, le corps social, après avoir épuisé en mouvements convulsifs ce qui peut lui rester de vigueur, ne se consume lentement et ne tombe en pourriture.”⁸ Ernest Pinard, too, summoned it at the 1857 trials of both Flaubert and Baudelaire; speaking of *Les Fleurs du mal*, he claimed: “Le poison qu’elles apportent n’éloigne pas d’elles; il monte à la tête, il grise les nerfs, il donne le trouble, le vertige, et il peut tuer aussi.”⁹ For both Frayssinous and Pinard, literature’s poison infiltrates the social or physical body surreptitiously – “nous ne [le] craignons pas”, “[il] n’éloigne pas” – but poses a mortal danger.

For Detambel to be resounding the metaphor might seem something of an oddness. Her doing so, though, allows her to connect her argument to the history of literature’s autonomization, and the authority and principles it afforded, at precisely the same time she seeks to invest literature with a more precise public function. And she does this in a historical moment in which the socio-economic autonomy of the literary field described by Bourdieu is in the process of unwinding – an unwinding already signalled in Bourdieu’s epilogue to *Les Règles de l’art*:

On peut se demander si la division en deux marchés, qui est caractéristique des champs de production culturelle depuis le milieu du XIX^e siècle, avec d’un côté le champ restreint des producteurs pour producteurs, et de l’autre le champ de grande production et la “littérature industrielle”, n’est pas menacée de disparition, la logique de la production commerciale tendant de plus en plus à s’imposer à la production d’avant-garde [...].

Et il faudrait analyser les nouvelles formes de mainmise et de dépendance.¹⁰

Where since the nineteenth century there had existed a separation between commercial literature dependent on the tastes of the mass market, on the one hand, and on the other a more autonomous field shielded from commercial demands, the integrity of the latter, Bourdieu argues, is more and more compromised.

Other scholars have since responded to his call to analyse “les nouvelles formes de mainmise et de dépendance”. Sapiro and Cécile Rabot, for instance, have studied the often-precarious professional lives of contemporary writers. In an increasingly difficult literary market made up of more and more writers but fewer and fewer sales, Sapiro and Rabot examine what writers today spend their time doing, and how they making their living. For many this requires a second job, while for others, it involves participating in various forms of public engagement – writing workshops, public talks and debates, book signings, live readings, and collaborative shows with other artists:

A l’orée du XXI^e siècle, le métier d’écrivain subit de profondes transformations, tant du point de vue des façons de le pratiquer que des conditions de son exercice. La diversification des activités connexes et des pratiques inter- ou multimédia incite l’auteur-e à être présent-e dans l’espace publique non plus seulement à travers son œuvre mais aussi à travers sa personne, sur un mode qui, à la différence de la figure de l’intellectuel engagé, privilégie la rencontre avec le public autour de la création elle-

⁸ Cited in Sapiro, p. 129.

⁹ See Sapiro, p. 261.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 468.

même, par le spectacle vivant, le débat, l'animation et la transmission.¹¹

According to Sapiro and Rabot, these new activities associated with the literary profession entail changes in both the competences expected of a writer, and their authorial identity. These changes range from, for example, the need to be relatively competent public speakers, to a changed sense of what it is to be a writer – which increasingly involves “animation” and something like more direct public service.¹²

Detambel's career typifies many of these developments. On her website are published details of her frequent television and radio appearances and performances, her various public talks in libraries and bookshops, her writing workshops, as well as her bibliotherapeutic work; she is a writer who has fully embraced public engagement and her role as an “animatrice” – indeed her website is divided into two parts, “écrire” and “animer”.¹³ Recently, she has begun offering on commission her writing services as a biographer for artists, individuals, and – in a stark instance of corporate interests entering the literary field – businesses. She trained as a physiotherapist before writing her first novel, and continues to practise, thereby exemplifying the contemporary tendency for writers to exercise a second profession. As physiotherapist she belongs to the legions of health professionals who today write literature; and as bibliotherapist, does so as one who writes “*en tant que médecin*”, “pour mettre en rapport pratiques médicales et littéraires”.¹⁴

Electroshock, Self-Help, and the Social Ideal of Autonomy

What I have wanted to demonstrate through my too brief and poisonous interlude on literary autonomy is something of the recalcitrance of this *mise en rapport*, the chafing of its poles. This is a chafing we see in Detambel's penchant for oxymoronic, “bad”-“good” syntagmata: cures which are “diablement efficace[s]” (LP, p. 41); readings which, “apparemment passive[s]”, are in fact “terriblement active[s]” (p. 78), or inflict “une folie douce” (p. 132) – couplets uneasily binding literature as poison to literature as remedy. Where the poison analogy harbours the history of literature's autonomy from social constraints, the remedy analogy speaks of public service for a present in which that autonomy has worn thin.

As discussed earlier, Detambel sees bibliotherapy as distinct from standard medical practice on account of literature's volatility, the unpredictability of its effects. This volatility she rhetorically performs through *accumulatio*, frequent lists averring the variousness of what literature can do: “La lecture répare, elle qualifie, elle affirme, elle confirme, elle projette dans le futur ou dans le passé, elle sublime, elle explore, elle identifie, elle éduque, elle crée” (p. 57); “Lire, c'est avoir le pouvoir de se concentrer, de retenir, ne pas oublier qui parle, ce qui vient de se passer” (p. 112); “Des bons livres sont ceux qui [...] galvanisent, qui électrisent, en un mot qui raniment” (p. 124). Her own lexical dexterity, refusing to settle on one or two terms

¹¹ Cécile Rabot and Gisèle Sapiro, “Conclusion”, in Gisèle Sapiro and Cécile Rabot (eds), *Profession? Écrivain* (Paris: CNRS, 2017), pp. 333–340 (p. 340).

¹² Also relevant here is Vincent Kaufmann's work on the preponderant influence of the audio-visual media ecosystem in setting the priorities of contemporary literature; see Vincent Kaufmann, *Dernières nouvelles du spectacle (ce que les médias font à la littérature)* (Paris: Seuil, 2017).

¹³ See <<https://detambel.com>>. For an analysis of Detambel's website and the authorial posture it presents, see Sylvie Ducas, “Faire écouter la littérature avec les yeux. Variations de l'*éthos* de l'écrivain dans un environnement numérique: les sites d'Éric Chevillard, de Chloé Delaume et de Régine Detambel”, *Itinéraires*, 2015: 3 (2016) <<http://doi.org/10.4000/itineraires.3031>>.

¹⁴ Gefen, p. 125.

for literature's salutary effects, on the one hand sidesteps the sort of medical precision that would be required for doctorly prescription; on the other, vouches almost as evidence for the vivifying yield of a life lived literarily.

But though Detambel avoids limiting or quantifying literature's beneficial effects – preferring a kind of abundant profusion – her book does privilege one effect above others. I should like now to examine this effect (a kind of stimulation or shock), which shall lead me to consider what Detambel's conception of bibliotherapy shares with dominant contemporary models of mental illness and therapeutic culture more generally – however much she may wish to distance creative bibliotherapy from its more medicalized counterpart.

In the seventh chapter, Detambel discusses the role played in her bibliotherapy by patients copying out “certains paragraphes particulièrement apaisants, nourrissants” (p. 60); and adds that part of the calming here comes from the texture of a page: “Certains cahiers au papier velouté, blanc au point de fermer les yeux, et soigneusement cousus, sont d'une grande douceur de page.” No sooner is this haptic soothing conjured, though, than it is summarily sidelined:

Prudence toutefois... Ni la lecture, ni l'écriture, ni la copie ne devraient être des abandons à une douceur de plume, car l'essentiel est tout de même d'être réveillé par un livre.

Après des heures de somnolence sur son sofa, à cause de la fièvre, l'hiver 1904, Kafka dolent écrivit pourtant à son ami Oskar Pollak: “On ne devrait lire que les livres qui vous mordent et vous piquent. [...] Un livre doit être la hache pour la mer gelée en nous. Voilà ce que je crois.”

Est-ce une coïncidence si Thomas Bernhard, malade chronique, lui aussi des poumons, fait l'apologie du livre qui secoue et ranime: “Lisez donc mes livres, c'est un amoncellement de millions de choc. C'est un alignement non seulement de phrases, mais d'impressions de choc. Un livre doit être aussi un choc...” (p. 62)

“Prudence” denotes the wisdom to avoid certain errors or dangers. The danger here to be avoided is insufficient danger, the risk that one will not risk enough; that one will privilege touchy-feely appeasement over violent vivification, books that soften over books that sting, bite, hack, and shock. In a quotation cited earlier, Bourdieu wrote that “la logique de la production commerciale ten[d] de plus en plus à s'imposer à la production d'avant-garde”; in Detambel's references here to Kafka and Bernhard we find something more like an avant-garde logic repackaged into commercializable form, sellable as bibliotherapy.

On the one hand, this passage indeed reflects a certain avant-gardist notion of awakening through literature; I think here, for example, of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty: “Au point d'usure où notre sensibilité est parvenue, il est certain que nous avons besoin avant tout d'un théâtre qui nous réveille: nerfs et coeur.”¹⁵ On the other hand, the word “shock” borrowed from Bernhard – which belongs to a broader, jolting lexical field in Detambel's book encompassing too verbs like “galvaniser”, “électriser”, “ranimer”, “secouer”, “faire tressaillir” –, when used as here to figure a form of psychotherapy, also eerily calls to mind another therapy of shocks, that administered by way of electricity.

I would like now to consider the notions of the psyche, of psychic impairment and repair

¹⁵ Antonin Artaud, “Le Théâtre et la cruauté”, in *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 131–136 (p. 131)

implied by this foregrounding of stimulation. Detambel's use of terms like "choc", "électriser", and so forth, conjuring as they do electroshock therapy, is a useful starting point. Sociologist Alain Ehrenberg has argued the introduction of electroshock therapy into clinical practice, and its coming into general use in France during the Second World War, marked an important stage in the history of psychiatry.¹⁶ First used to treat schizophrenic patients, electroshock proved remarkably effective as a treatment for melancholia. Before long, psychiatrists were testing and debating the efficacy of its application for other sorts of disorders whose symptoms included depressive mood. These debates – prefiguring those that would arise with the introduction of antidepressants – were, Ehrenberg argues, fundamentally about the nature of mental illness and psychiatric practice. Is depressive mood a *symptom* of diverse pathologies of diverse aetiologies requiring diverse treatments, or is depression *itself* a pathology that can be cured by a single form of medication?

Ehrenberg situates these debates within the broader history of psychiatry, and the tension that emerged during the twentieth century between two models of mental illness: one, associated with Sigmund Freud, based on psychic conflicts to be resolved; the other, associated with Pierre Janet, based on a deficit to be filled. If Freud remains more renowned, it is Janet's model, Ehrenberg argues, that has proved the more enduring. He correlates this victory with the crowning of autonomy as a social ideal: the deficit model "amorces sa réussite au moment où le modèle disciplinaire de gestion des conduites, les règles d'autorité et de conformité aux interdits qui assignaient aux classes sociales comme aux deux sexes un destin ont cédé devant des normes qui incitent chacun à l'initiative individuelle en l'enjoignant à devenir lui-même" (p. 10). Freudian neurosis befits a society of discipline, on this view; Janettian insufficiency, a society of individual initiative and autonomy.

Detambel does briefly mention Freud: "Sigmund Freud a fait de [l']état d'inachèvement le facteur principal des névroses. La condition névrotique de l'homme découlerait de 'l'état de [...] dépendance longuement prolongée du petit enfant d'homme.' [...] Si cela prédispose l'homme à la névrose, c'est parce que cela le place dans un inapaisable besoin d'amour" (pp. 139–140).¹⁷ But she does not seriously develop on this theory of dependency and neurosis; instead, her description of bibliotherapy's mode of operation aligns more with a deficiency model of mental illness: "En bibliothérapie, une personne en aide une autre à se reconstruire en lui redonnant, par la médiation de la lecture, une *puissance* d'imagination et de création. *Comblé* par l'imagination, l'identification, l'interprétation, *un espace psychique laissé vide par le manque*, la pauvreté, voilà le rôle du bibliothérapeute" (p. 138; my emphases). The patient's illness is a *void*, to be *filled* through the *power* of imagination and creation.

Moreover, Detambel's approach more generally echoes the social ideal of autonomy described by Ehrenberg, with its focus on individual initiative, self-affirmation, and self-becoming: "La lecture enclenche un processus d'affirmation de soi qui est essentiel pour tous. Chez l'enfant pour développer la construction de son identité, de sa personnalité. Chez le sujet âgé pour préserver son autonomie et sa dignité" (p. 126). Retelling the story of the *Thousand and One Nights* as a case study in creative bibliotherapy, Detambel writes: "Shahryar est débloqué, déverrouillé, il peut repartir pour l'inépuisable quête de lui-même. Le voilà de nouveau en devenir. C'est d'ailleurs cet incessant devenir, synonyme de santé, qui nous interdit

¹⁶ For Ehrenberg's discussion of electroshock therapy, see Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi: dépression et société* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2000 [1998]), pp. 62–92. Gefen has already suggested the link between Detambel and Ehrenberg's analysis of the social ideal of autonomy I develop on here; see Gefen, p. 16.

¹⁷ Detambel does not give a citation for this quotation; from my own research, I have established it comes from Freud's 1926 "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety".

de relire jamais le même livre!” (p. 55).¹⁸

An inexhaustible quest for the self that might, nonetheless, prove exhausting. According to Axel Honneth, the spirit of self-realization stirred by Detambel’s book is one that, far from aiding contemporary Western subjects of late capitalism, might nettle them further: “The individualism of self-realization, gradually emergent over the course of the past fifty years, has since been transmuted [...] into an emotionally fossilized set of demands under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper.”¹⁹ On this view, once radical calls made for autonomous self-realization have since become institutionalized expectations demanded *of* individuals, not *by* them. We might think here too of Micki McGee’s “belabored self”, “overworked both as the subject and as the object of its own efforts at self-improvement”.²⁰ Like Honneth, McGee recognizes in the contemporary Western world an imperative placed on working people to focus on the constant invention of an autonomous self in a labour market founded on “flexibility”, watchword for insecurity. Studying American self-improvement literature, McGee remarks how such works “defin[e] [their] readers as lacking some essential feature of adequacy – be it beauty, health, wealth, employment options, sexual partners, marital happiness, or specialized technical knowledge – and then offers itself as the solution” (p. 18). One might argue Detambel’s bibliotherapy does something of the sort: defines its readers as lacking creativity and imagination and offers itself as the solution, by making reading a labour of self-invention.

McGee’s offers a further insight into what is at play in creative bibliotherapy. She observes an “aesthetic turn” in contemporary self-improvement culture, emblemized by Julia Cameron’s 1992 *The Artist’s Way* and entrenched since. The ideal of life as work of art, she argues, acts as an “ethically neutral buffer” to soften the profit-driven, commercial logic of self-improvement: “Aesthetic values were offered to women who were dissatisfied with the application of market values to private life and unlikely to realize significant economic advances, as well as to workers faced with both decreasing employment stability and economic rewards” (p. 21) – precariousness goes down flusher when framed as creativity. Furthermore, this artifying of self-improvement coincides with the entrepreneurialization of the artist: “This idea of life as a work of art found its corollary in the emergence of the figure of the artist as the ideal, self-motivating, self-monitoring, and even self-employing worker” (p.22). From this vantage, one might view Detambel’s bibliotherapy as a work of ingenious entrepreneurialism, a canny response to the precarious literary field she faces – espousing the creativity that of necessity birthed it.

Bibliotherapeutic Empathy

Hitherto in this piece I have traced relations between Detambel’s work and two notions of autonomy. I have suggested her conception of creative bibliotherapy is grounded in an attachment to the history of literature’s autonomy, an autonomy of whose undoing her work is nonetheless exemplary. And I have described ties between her understanding of literary reading’s roborative outcomes and prevailing conceptions of mental well-being as autonomy –

¹⁸ Detambel borrows this reference to the *Thousand and One Nights* from Marc-Alain Ouaknin, on whose book on bibliotherapy – *Bibliothérapie: lire c’est guérir* (Paris: Seuil, 1994) – she draws extensively.

¹⁹ Axel Honneth, “Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7: 4 (2004), 463–478 (p. 474).

²⁰ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 16.

conceptions whose influence might though, according to some accounts, do more harm than good.

In so doing, I have signalled links between Detambel's work and self-help culture. But *Les Livres prennent soin de nous* – a book about how books help us – is not ostensibly a self-help book. Instead, the *destinataire* to whom Detambel makes sporadic appeal is the prospective bibliotherapist: “À vous de prendre le relais dans vos ateliers. Pratiquerez-vous la bibliothérapie individuelle ou une bibliothérapie en groupe?” (p. 143).

This avowed ideal reader is surely neither the most anticipated nor common actual reader. *Actes Sud*, a major publisher, would not have widely distributed it in both *broché* and paperback form had such a limited audience been forecast, and evidence shows it has been both sold and read as a self-help book: bookseller Gibert Joseph's website categorizes it under “Guides pratiques de développement personnel” as well as “Essais critiques et littéraires”,²¹ and “Catherine M.R.”, a reviewer on Amazon, refers to it as a “vraie et bonne source de développement personnel!”²² Moreover, Detambel's book shares many formal family resemblances with its self-help siblings; not least what Beth Blum has called “the manic citational practice of self-help”, which often brews diverse discourses and disciplines into its edifying stock.²³ Detambel cites literary writers aplenty, of course, from Michel de Montaigne to Nancy Huston – but also literary critics, philosophers, doctors, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, art therapists, anthropologists, Jean-François Champollion, Quintilian, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov...²⁴

“Ne demande pas ton chemin à quelqu'un qui sait car tu ne pourras pas t'égarer, déclarait Rabbi Nahman de Bratslav voilà plus de deux siècles” (p. 13). Rabbi Nachman's self-adverse advice (to not follow advice) brings me back to a crucial quandary for creative bibliotherapy. As we saw towards the beginning of this article, Detambel opposes the latter to its cognitive-behavioural counterpart on account of literature's unpredictability – an unpredictability which underpins both its autonomy from medical manipulation, and its therapeutic potential to “électrise[r]” its patients into autonomy. But if bibliotherapy is predicated on the essential unpredictability of literature's effects, how is a bibliotherapist to go about proposing texts to patients?

Les Livres prennent soin de nous does not contain a systematic methodology for bibliotherapeutic practice. In this sense, Detambel seems to licence the prospective bibliotherapist herself a degree of autonomy, to devise or improvise her own approach. Instead of legislating a programme, Detambel appeals to the bibliotherapist's empathy: “La bibliothérapie nécessite l'empathie. En effet, l'empathie guide le conseiller-lecteur, qui choisira d'autant mieux dans la bibliothèque ces livres destinés à favoriser l'identification

²¹ See Gibert Joseph's website: <<https://www.gibert.com/les-livres-prennent-soin-de-nous-pour-une-bibliothérapie-creative-6927772.html>> [accessed 24 January 2020].

²² See <https://www.amazon.fr/gp/customer-reviews/R383DPPD12WNYA/ref=cm_cr_othr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=2330073097> [accessed 24 January 2020].

²³ Beth Blum, “The Self-Help Hermeneutic: Its Global History and Literary Future”, *PMLA*, 133: 5 (2018), 1099–1117 (p. 1100).

²⁴ ... not to mention those citations which go unacknowledged. Soon after the book's publication, anthropologist Michèle Petit accused Detambel of plagiarizing multiple passages from her books. The matter was settled out of court, and future editions have been supplemented with an acknowledgement of Petit's work. For details, see Hubert Prolengeau, “Plagiat chez Actes Sud: la bibliothérapie, ça donne des envies de copie?”, *Télérama*, 11 July 2015 <<https://www.telerama.fr/livre/plagiat-chez-actes-sud-la-bibliothérapie-ca-donne-des-envies-de-copie,129138.php>> [accessed 2 February 2020].

émotionnelle du patient-lecteur, en lui faisant ressentir ce que ressent l'autre" (pp. 136–137). A veritable trove of empathy is here called upon, tracing various vectors. The bibliotherapist must empathize with the patient, to identify the psychic malady that vexes her; must empathize with the book's characters, to identify their emotional states; must proleptically empathize with the patient empathizing with the book's characters, to imagine what if anything the patient will find in them, and whether what she finds might mend her malady.

Such an approach has doubtless much to recommend it, and clearly resonates with some of the concerns of care ethics. Detambel's wish to focus on the individual needs of particular reader-patients chimes, for example, with moral philosopher Helga Kuhse's work on nursing; Kuhse advocates a "dispositional notion of care" for nursing practice, to encourage nurses "to be more receptive to the needs of patients, where the patients are recognized as *particular others*, that is, as individuals with special needs, beliefs, desires and wants, rather than a malfunctioning organism."²⁵ Detambel's bibliotherapeutic empathy, like Kuhse's dispositional care, might prove doubly beneficial. On the one hand, it might help "to 'see' what is required of us in a particular situation";²⁶ in the case of bibliotherapy, therefore, to make apter choices concerning reading materials and the form that reading should take. On the other, the very act of approaching a patient as an individual through empathy and dispositional care might itself be restorative; for as Kuhse puts it, no patient wants to be treated as "the appendectomy in Ward 3" (p. 150) (or else "the depressive at 3 o'clock").

What the bibliotherapist's empathy cannot do though, in my view, is fully uphold the distinction Detambel poses between creative bibliotherapy on the one hand, and the medicalized, "manipulative" prescriptions of cognitive-behavioural bibliotherapy on the other. For if the bibliotherapist's role is to determine, to predict what kind of tonic effect what books will produce on what readers – then all the talk of risk, of unpredictability, and of shunning "manipulation" is thereby relegated to the bye. Empathy might appear a "soft" skill, leagues apart from pharmacology; but it is also calculation, prediction, diagnosis, prognosis. The patient and the book are here no less "manipulated" than they would be in cognitive-behavioural bibliotherapy, as the latter is painted by Detambel; that "manipulation" simply offers a more bespoke prescription.

A possible solution to this quandary is implied when Detambel writes: "Chez les Anglo-Saxons, la chose est claire depuis longtemps: la bibliothérapie est l'usage guidé de la lecture, *en gardant à l'esprit qu'un résultat thérapeutique est attendu*" (p. 57; my emphasis). In cognitive-behavioural bibliotherapy, the patient reads purposively, keeps in mind the therapeutic effect they are seeking. By contrast, the relationship between reading and purpose Detambel here implies for creative bibliotherapy is one in which the therapeutic end is achievable only because one does not aim for it. Reading has here purpose without purposiveness, suggesting something like the opposite of the placebo effect: not a sugar pill that allays pain because one believes it will allay pain, but a book that does one good because one does not treat it as something that will do one good.

Detambel's bibliotherapy would depend then on a feint indulged by patients, that their reading is disinterested. I am not convinced this fiction is tenable. It depends on treating patients as dupes, on eclipsing one important empathic vector in the bibliotherapeutic situation: that running from the patient to her bibliotherapist. Not only will a bibliotherapist read a book through the eyes of her patient, imagining how her patient will respond; the patient, too, will

²⁵ Helga Kuhse, *Caring: Nurses, Women and Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 150.

²⁶ Kuhse, p. 152.

read the book through the eyes of her therapist, and conjecture what it is about that book her therapist supposes will do her good – very much mindful of her reading’s therapeutic purpose.

Conclusion

In this article, I have read Detambel’s *Les Livres prennent soin de nous* with a focus on the diverse forms of autonomy it seeks to support: literature’s autonomy from medicine; creative bibliotherapy’s from cognitive-behavioural bibliotherapy; the autonomy of the patient, the book, and the bibliotherapist. I have demonstrated how these various forms of autonomy, far from harmoniously coinciding, contradict and conflict with one another. And I have traced the ways in which Detambel’s ideas are grounded in and reflect, on the one hand, the history of literature’s autonomization, an imperilled process whose imperilment Detambel exemplifies while desiring to combat it; on the other, the history of psychiatry and self-help culture, with their links to an ideal of autonomy Detambel shares while meaning to oppose them.

In concluding, I find myself siding with a group of outraged artists projected by Detambel: “Et tant pis si les artistes sont outrés que leur art puisse être qualifié de thérapeutique, pour eux-mêmes et pour les autres!” (p. 139). My contestation comes in two parts. The first stands aside from my discussion hitherto, but which I feel duty-bound to voice in any discussion of therapy: that in vaunting literature’s therapeutic potential, Detambel risks dissuading those in psychic distress from seeking the support they need, therapeutic support whose efficacy is more robustly theorized and more copiously evidenced.

My second objection, though, is rooted in sympathy with Detambel. I agree literature can “réparer”, “qualifier”, “affirmer”, “confirmer”, “projeter dans le futur ou dans le passé”, “sublimier”, “explorer”, “identifier”, “éduquer”, “créer” (p. 57); it can also numb, nettle, unsettle, stymie, help or hinder sleep, tickle, exhaust, upset, irritate, and bore. And I would wager literature’s value lies somehow in this variousness; and even that this variousness might prove sometimes therapeutic. But the therapeutic frame cannot contain this variousness. As Josie Billington writes in *Is Literature Healthy?*, “any therapeutic effect of literature arises precisely from literature’s never trying or meaning to be a therapy”;²⁷ where Frayssinous and Pinard in the nineteenth century found literature’s “poison” acting surreptitiously, it may be its remedy, too, requires stealth; a stealth the label “bibliotherapy”, even prefixed “creative”, betrays.

Sustaining this stealth might mean contesting therapeutic claims made for literature, even emphasizing its capacity to poison – *without* rehabilitating that poison as remedy, as tonic shock. For folding literature’s variousness into therapy, as one does when one renames reading “bibliotherapy”, risks undermining the volatile variousness of literature’s effects; including its therapy, which announced in advance might be annulled.

²⁷ Josie Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 136.