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I need, I wish, I *neesh*
Why we can't live without narration

Enrico Meglioli

Abstract • Only a few decades ago, with computer technologies on the rise and the belief that only the so-called "hard sciences" would shape the lives of future generations, few would have imagined that stories and narratives would have not only maintained their central role in human societies, but would even reinforce it. Narration has been recently recognized as a universal feature of humanity, a meta-language capable of giving order to the reality and making us escape from the boundaries of space and time, representing at the same time both a need and a wish of every human being. Given its importance, why don't we take care of our stories the same way we take care of our bodies? This is the goal of modern bibliotherapy, which puts into practice recent discoveries for the improvement of the *homo narrans*' well-being.

Keywords • Narrative Desire; Homo Narrans; Narrative Turn; Narrative Paradigm; Bibliotherapy

Abstract • Solo pochi decenni fa, di fronte alla crescita esponenziale delle tecnologie informatiche e alla convinzione che solo le cosiddette "scienze dure" avrebbero plasmato la vita delle future generazioni, pochi avrebbero immaginato che storie e narrazioni avrebbero non solo mantenuto un ruolo centrale nelle società umane, ma che lo avrebbero addirittura rinforzato. La narrazione è stata recentemente riconosciuta come elemento universale dell'esistenza umana, un meta-linguaggio capace di dare ordine alla realtà e di farci evadere dai confini dello spazio e del tempo, rappresentando, al contempo, un bisogno e un desiderio di ogni essere umano. Considerata la loro importanza, perché non ci prendiamo cura delle nostre storie allo stesso modo in cui ci preoccupiamo del nostro corpo? La biblioterapia moderna si pone tale scopo, mettendo in pratica scoperte recenti per il benessere dell'*homo narrans*.

Parole chiave • Desiderio Narrativo; Homo Narrans; Svolta Narrativa; Paradigma Narrativo; biblioterapia

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1. One more story

Do we need narratives, or do we wish for them? The distinction between needs and wishes is a blurry one. From one point of view, a need can be seen as a wish frequently fulfilled, whereas a wish is a need rarely satisfied. We need water to survive, but we don't desperately wish for it until we run out of it. On the other hand, we can wish for the most different things, such as happiness, love, a good job, a baby, and, in the case we reach the object of our desire, we try to keep it with all our strength, making it a part of our everyday life. Wishes and needs always change, blend into each other, captivating and shaking both body and mind. They are so intertwined that we could hazard a new term for describing their union: *neesh*, the place where our needs sustain our life, and our deepest wishes converge in the desire to fully live, because the object of need is what gives us life, whereas the object of desire is what gives life meaning, and the one can't exist without the other.

Given these premises, one might ask: is it reasonable to talk about a *neesh*, a need and a wish (and wish's stronger, more determined brother, desire), for narration? Since the very day of our birth, we are constantly accompanied by those unique human sounds that we later recognize as words, and then combine into narratives, that provide us with representations of who we are (sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, 'bundles of joy'), of who the others are, and then, step by step, of what dwells around us and beyond the reach of our senses. Genetically predisposed to, and epigenetically raised in, such an imaginative, words-structured environment, it is not surprising that young human beings soon move from a simple receptive condition to a creative one, trying to express their own perspective of the world and of the part of it they know better than anyone else: themselves. Such communicative artefacts can take multiple forms, but all share a 'common language', a frame that can be found anywhere in the world and in any time: narration.

The awareness of the power of narration and of its influence in every aspect of human knowledge and cultural expression is recent, but so fast growing and widespread that more than one 'narrative turn' has been announced and more than one 'narrative paradigm' has been proposed, embracing the deepest human cognitive and moral skills. Meanwhile, the long-standing tradition of using narratives in scientific realms, such as medicine, anticipated academic blessing and has been proved prophetic of many neuroscientific discoveries. Retracing the path of narration from the nooks of poetic inspiration to the great halls of scientific research could be helpful to better understand its often silent contribution to our present condition, as both individuals and human race, and to steer our need and desire for it towards new benefits for all.

2. Narrating Desires, Desiring Narrations: Balzac and Homer, Book and Song

In the deepest recesses of life there is absence. An everlasting absence and longing for something we barely know. In a sense, human beings constantly live in an amphibious state that urges them to live the present moment and the ‘real life’ and, at the same time, to look for something else, something different from the life they know, a kind of ‘no-life’ or ‘other-life’, the life of desires, that resembles the life of needs as the two-dimensional drawing of a bird could resemble a real, flying and chirping one. From this point of view, we can understand Brooks’ theory of the *narrative desire*,[1] according to which every story is driven by the human desire of giving order and meaning to the multiple, chaotic experiences of life. But, as meaning usually lies at the end of a story, the narrative desire becomes a desire *for* the end, recalling the struggle between Eros and Thanatos that permeates Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[2] However, whereas Freud eventually conclude that the death-wish is the leading force, as life deeply desires to return to the peace and quiet of the inorganic, metaphorically and narratively represented by the conclusion of the story, the moment the reader turns the last page we could imagine to find new life and new hope in the ‘real’ world, thanks to the feelings and thoughts bequeathed by the story.

Needs and wishes, thus, seem to inhabit not two different and conflicting realms, but rather a blurred continuum, an intricate forest climbing a steep mountain, and we always walk through the trees and uphill, from the deepest recesses of the earth, where our needs dwells, to the high places where the stars inside the word ‘desire’ (from the Latin *de sidere*, meaning «from the stars»)[3] shines, as parts of our world, but always beyond our reach. Because needs want for us what fulfils us as living beings, whereas wishes want for us what fulfils us as human beings, endowed and burdened with the capacity of imagining what there is not and what there could be, who we are not and who we might be, even against any reasonable possibility. We all need and desire, demand and produce narrations because they are the most accurate way of translating that wild, tangled, inner land of us in a communicable way, that we can share with others to find enrichment, recognition, disapproval, or criticism, but also, and above all, to observe ourselves, and attempt to understand and order our own complexity.

Brooks clearly recognizes that desire is not only a major narrative theme throughout the history of literature, but also a dominant, if not *the* dominant force that drives narrations towards their fulfilment and conclusion. [4] Like the sequence of functions of the traditional folktales, as described and analysed by Vladimir Propp,[5] usually dealing with a heroic quest, desires can be found at the foundations of the majority of stories and, we can say, of human lives as well, as they are told and shared. Thus, the ambitious hero,

[1] Peter Brooks, *Narrative Desire*, «Style», 18, 3, 1984, pp. 312-327.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. by Caroline Jane Mary Hubback, in *International psychoanalytical library*, ed. by Ernest Jones, London, The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922.

[3] «Desire», *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, retrieved February 26, 2021, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/desire_1> [Ultima consultazione: 9 dicembre 2021].

[4] Brooks, *op. cit.*

[5] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Lawrence Scott, 2nd ed., Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968.

especially in the modern novel, can be considered as a kind of «desiring machine»,[6] metaphor of all human beings constantly longing for something that reveals itself unsatisfying when obtained. Taking as example Raphaël de Valentin, the young protagonist of Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*,[7] Brooks further illuminate this concept, that is both literary and philosophical: thanks to a magic skin received from a mysterious antiques dealer, Raphaël begins to fulfil all his wildest desires, but he never achieves the expected happiness; at the same time, the skin shrinks a bit after every desire, eventually killing its owner. Balzac's modern parable, therefore, cautions the readers against wasting their lives in trying to realize all the wishes of their minds, but, at the same time, it also conveys other equally important messages.

First, it shows that every desire has a price, that usually takes us away from our everyday, physical life. As Freud pointed out, Eros and Thanatos go hand in hand, fighting and supporting each other. Each desire is a new grasp of the magic skin. In this sense, Balzac's story admonishes us to carefully choose the desires that really matter, the ones that are open to the future, not to the end, so that they will not kill us when realized, neither physically nor emotionally. The risk is to reach Raphaël's stage of self-dissatisfaction, where «The world belonged to him, he could do and have everything, and he no longer wanted anything».[8]

Secondly, not even the complete renunciation of all desires, that is, the ultimate desire of death, can provide peace. Facing the utter failure of his previous strategy, Raphaël does try to solve the conflict between life and death, or death in life, by ceasing to wish. However, instead of leaving the circle of Eros and Thanatos, he moves faster towards the self-annihilation extreme, failing to change his perspective on the world. The death instinct described by Freud takes the lead, and Raphaël chooses to avoid any occasion for desiring, cancelling beauty from his sight and suppressing imagination. In so doing, nothing really changes: the desire for death simply replaces other kinds of unsatisfactory desires, revealing the paradox of narration: as the story moves on and the protagonist's desires flare up and extinguish, the final one, the desire for order and conclusion, marks the end of life, of reading and narrating. One possible, alternative solution comes from the antiques dealer, the 'donor', following Propp's terminology, that gives the magic skin to the miserable protagonist of Balzac's novel. The old man affirms that the eternal struggle between *vouloir* and *pouvoir*, between desiring and being able to, can be eluded by choosing a third option, *savoir*, knowledge, «by which he means vicarious and imaginary enjoyment, "the sublime faculty of making the universe appear in one's head", experiencing pleasure in purely ideal form».[9] Narratives themselves, in the antiques dealer's opinion, represent an escape from the prison of life's dissatisfactions and self-destructiveness, almost as if, by reading a new story after the other, both the greatest desires, for life and its conclusion, could be finally satisfied. This 'storytelling strategy', on the other hand, can be considered another illusion that, again, doesn't break the circle, replicating it as many times as are the stories ever told. But it could also be the first step towards a real change, as it was for Shahrazad, whose enchanting tales of fantastic worlds finally broke the deadly mechanism of the Sultan's cruelty.

[6] Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 312.
[7] Honoré de Balzac, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, trans. by Ellen Marriage, London, Dent, 1906.
[8] Ivi, p. 209.
[9] Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

This leads us to the third message of Brooks' analysis, regarding not so much the desires that proliferate and deteriorate inside each story, but rather the very desire to tell a story, the story of one's own life. As a matter of fact, in his moment of deepest misery, Raphaël reveals exactly that particular wish, strong and palpable as a physical need: to tell himself, to narrate his own adventures to somebody who cares, who recognizes him both as the author and the main character of a real, true story. Telling one's own story creates something more than a relationship between audience and narrator, between receiver and giver. It creates a dialogue that does represent, this time, a real innovation, the beginning of something that transcends the individual panoply of needs and wishes. That is not the case for Raphaël, who, along all his entire existence, has never had somebody really caring for his life narrative, which contains all the desires of his life, many more and deeper than those made real by the magic skin. Reflecting upon Raphaël's tragic end, the reader is called to recognize that the exchange of stories is «the more powerful and thus more therapeutic narrative fiction»,[10] the «primordial desire»,[11] in which language comes back to its essential role, being the most sophisticated means of communication between mutually recognizing individuals. Narration, therefore, is a complex, multi-layered reality, sometimes similar to a mirror room, where narrators and characters reflect each other in a distorted way, sometimes to a set of matryoshka dolls, always displaying some new forms of the same theme, or, at the very end, nothing at all.

More recently, taking inspiration from Brooks' work, David Elmer investigated the universality of the narrative desire,[12] focusing on the *Odyssey*, a product of narration apparently diametrically opposed from the nineteenth century novels that were the objects of Brooks' study. The *Odyssey* represents a completely different literary canon, mostly because of its original oral nature and the fact that its plot, steeped in mythological tales and recurring themes, as well as repeated performances, was mostly already known by its audience. This is the reason why Brooks' conceptualization of the narrative desire, as the desire to rush through the pages to discover and consummate the end of the story, seems to require at least a partial adaptation of the Homeric masterpiece, as well as of other epic poems, across cultures and centuries. Indeed, what kind of desire can be fuelled by a story whose end, whose *telos*, is already known? What reasons drive a reader (or listener) to delve again and again in a world he or she has already extensively explored, and that seems to contain no surprise? Surely enough, there are still similarities between the two models of desire, as similar are, in a way, narrators and audiences in any age of human history. The *Odyssey*, as a matter of fact, as Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*, is the story of the desire for the deferral of the main desire, the continuous postponement of the final goal of the hero's quest, which, for Odysseus, is the return to Ithaca. One possible explanation for this continuous deferral, by both the protagonist of the poem and its narrator, is that Odysseus doesn't really desire to come back home. Or, at least, he is more prone to other, contrasting desires, the strongest of which is to keep on telling the story of his adventures, so that the narration may never end. This could seem apparently counter-intuitive, but, in reality, it is as perfect a representation of what happens in the human heart as any modern novel or contemporary TV series could ever produce. One

[10] Ivi, p. 324.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] David F. Elmer, *The Odyssey and the Desires of Traditional Narrative*, in *Zbornik radova međunarodnog znanstvenog skupa "Natales grate numeras?"*, ed. by Diana Sorić, Linda Mijić, Anita Zadar Bartulović, Sveučilište u Zadru, 2020, pp. 3-22.

half of us knows the goal to strive for in order to stay in the community, whereas the other half is driven by all the possible stories that could be pursued alone.

All these tumultuously coexisting elements, embodied in the peculiar form of the epic poem, with its multiple, ever-the-same, and ever-changing performances, leads Elmer to stress four pairs of opposites strengths, characterizing the *Odyssey* and the traditional narrative desire that runs through it.[13]

First of all, the opposition between "centripetal and centrifugal desires". As anticipated, the *Odyssey* is a story of multiple stories, where the ultimate desire, the *nostos*, the perilous homecoming by sea, is constantly challenged by the protagonist's *thumos* and that of his companions, their burning desire for recognition and for becoming part of those epic songs they know by heart. But the desires hindering the *nostos* can also take the form of very primordial, material ones, of physical needs, such as hunger, as predicted by the prophet Tiresias. Thus, many opposite impulses fight against Odysseus' ultimate goal, some of them coming from outside, others coming from inside the hero, causing a conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces that allows the story to survive so long, before the inevitable resolution. Again, we can see at work the well-known struggle between the desire for the end of the narration, and the desire for its never-ending expansion. But with a peculiarity: being the audiences of the epic performance generally aware of the conclusion and of the main sequences of the story, the various narrators focused their efforts essentially on adding, modifying, or skipping minor episodes and descriptions, shaping the rhythm, not the major themes, of the narration.

The second opposition, strongly related to the influential role of instincts and desires, is the one between recollection and amnesia. As stressed by Bakker,[14] in the Homeric culture memory had a strong performative and corporeal dimension, radically different from the modern one. To remember something basically meant to *do* something: to remember food was akin to eating, to remember a battle was akin to fighting, and so on. The Greek word for 'memory', most significantly, included the noun *menos*, the might and spiritual strength that narratives, and the memory of them, can offer to those who enjoy them. In Bakker's words:

> a very physical memory, a strong desire for the repetition of a pleasurable sensation. The drive is to infuse one's *menos* with something that itself possesses *menos*, so that one is able to embody it and so have *menos* oneself.[15]

This millennia-old concept of memory, as really *doing* and *feeling* what is recalled by mind, bears surprising similarities with the recent discovery of the mirror neurons and their capacity of essentially replicating, inside the brain, whatever action their owner sees performed by others (or even what is read or listened to), as if he or she were acting, without further reflection or cognitive mediation.[16] From this point of view, we can understand how attending a performance already known was a way of truly re-living the facts told in the story. Moreover, memory is the *conditio sine qua non* of the whole

[13] Ivi, p. 6.
[14] Egbert J. Bakker, *Epic Remembering*, in *Orality, Literacy, Memory in the Ancient Greek and Roman World*, ed. by E. Anne Mackay, Leiden, Brill, 2008, pp. 65-77.
[15] Ivi, p. 69.
[16] Giacomo Rizzolatti, Maddalena Fabbri-Destro, Luigi Cattaneo, *Mirror Neurons and Their Clinical Relevance*, «Nature Clinical Practice Neurology», 5, 1, 2009, pp. 24-34.

narration: if Odysseus had not remembered his home and family, his desire to return home would have vanished; if Poseidon had forgiven and forgotten Odysseus's outrage to the god's son, Polyphemus, Ithaca would have been reached long before; and, finally, if the Suitors' families had not forgotten Odysseus's slaughtering, the violence would have continued, and so the story. Selective memory and selective amnesia, therefore, seem the cognitive foundations of desiring.

Memory, on the other hand, is also the base of recognition, which, alongside difference, forms the third dyad of the traditional narrative desire. Recognizing, in every performance of the same narrative, what is original and what is familiar is the way the audience builds connections between past and present experiences and anticipates future ones, giving meaning to both repetition and disorder. This web of recognitions of similarities and anticipations of differences, stretching over and beyond the single performance and embracing a large part of the single spectator's life as part of a community of values with a shared tradition, is something peculiar of the traditional narrative described by Elmer, an aspect that also recognizes a deep value to experience and knowledge of the past, as a way to understand the present and foreshadow the future.

Finally, similarly to the connections made by the audience between past and present experiences, each performance of a traditional oral poem also represents a metonymy for the totality of the tradition, both an individual fragment standing on its own and an integrated part of something bigger, that the audience is called to reconstruct in his mind and memory. In this sense, we can understand the apparently confused way in which the poem tells the story of Odysseus' return, of his contrasting desires and of the many adventures, that demands an active effort of reordering from the audience, almost as it was a puzzle to complete and bring back to the original, perfect form, but that, eventually, looks different at every try. The tension between fragmentation and integration, therefore, represent another form of the centrifugal-centripetal, recollection-amnesia and difference-recognition ancestral conflict, to which we could add many others, such as chaos-order, self-community, freedom-responsibility.

Altogether, the totality that a modern reader can keep in his hands in the form of a complete, physical book, was unknown to the spectators of an epic poem, who had to find wholeness (indeed never fully attained) in a more active and challenging way, through their memory of other performances, their knowledge of the epic tradition and a continuous confrontation between differences and repetitions, old and new, in a literary mirror of what history and life were in a world without written, immutable words.

Should we, therefore, conclude that the traditional narrative desire is now the relic of a cultural world that is no more? I don't think so. The *aoidos*, namely, the storytellers and poem-singers that were so common in the ancient world, can be very few today, but not at all the epic worlds they used to forge. The recent explosion of intermediality and transmediality has partially reversed the trend towards an increasing individualization of both readers and authors, that began, surely enough, at the dawn of written literature, with a major leap with the invention of printing, leading to an exponential increase in self-conclusive stories, that didn't need to be memorized, nor compared to a pervasive, culturally shaping and shaped tradition. Nowadays, non-written media, such as cinema and television, and the new digital ones, are contributing to the creation of a plurality of new traditions, originated from narrative universes characterized by a level of richness and engagement never seen before. George Lucas' *Star War*s saga was undoubtedly one of the first, most celebrated cases, spreading plots and subplots in any existing media and building a community of millions of fans-readers-viewers-gamers around the world, sharing the same memory and tradition about this fictional, but extremely tangible,

expanded universe. The *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* bestsellers, the Marvel comics, the Disney movies, and dozens of TV series are other examples of narratives born on one or few media and later evolved into imaginative empires, capable of moving more people, both physically and emotionally, and with stronger sense of community and goal sharing. than many 'real' nations. If protest movements around the world, such as the pro-democracy manifestations in Hong Kong and Myanmar, use symbols borrowed from fictional worlds to give order and meaning to their desires for rights, freedom and prosperity, we can assume that narratives are really coming out of the book again, to shape words, thoughts and actions, in a way that fully displays the power of *menos*, the spirit of narration that gives strength to those who remember and embody it, making them experience a burning desire and a need to be protagonists, not spectators, of their own story.

3. Discovering who we are: the *homo narrans* and the narrative turn(s)

As we have seen, humans are made by stories at least as much as stories are made by humans. Since its creation in 1967, thanks to the German folklorist Kurt Ranke,[17] the notion of *homo narrans* has gained increasing popularity. It has been re-asserted and further analysed as an appropriate expression to convey the great importance of narration for humans, both as individuals and more broadly as species. One of the most precise and compelling analysis of this concept was made by Walter Fisher in 1984.[18] Fisher compares and contrasts what he calls the «narrative paradigm» with the traditional theory of human communication, based on reason, rationality and argumentation. By narration, on the other hand, Fisher

> [does] not mean a fictive composition whose propositions may be true or false and have no necessary relationship to the message of that composition. By 'narration', I refer to a theory of symbolic actions - words and/or deeds - that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination.
> The narrative paradigm, then, can be considered a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme.[19]

Combining the argumentative and literary frameworks in the narrative one, Fisher doesn't deny the central role of reason and rationality, but incorporates it in an alternative paradigm, one that doesn't intend to replace the existing ones, but to be truly universal, shared by all people everywhere in the world. But why is it so important to include the narrative side of the communication? Narratives, as Goldberg claims, «gives rise to those convictions, within which they gain their sense and meaning, and from which they have been abstracted».[20] Convictions, but ordinary experience as well, with all its meanings, rationality, and objectivity. Narration, therefore, represents the red thread connecting all

[17] Karl Ranke, *Kategorienprobleme der Volksprosa*, «Fabula», 9, 1-3, 1967, pp. 4-12.
[18] Walter R. Fisher, *Narration as a Human Communication paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument*, «Communication Monographs», 51, 1984, pp. 1-20.
[19] Ivi, p. 2.
[20] Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative*, Nashville, The Parthenon Press, 1982, p. 35.

the otherwise isolated elements of existence, be they facts or thoughts, giving them direction and full intelligibility.

The narrative paradigm, then, considers the human being essentially as a storytelling animal, declaring the *homo narrans* the master metaphor of the human experience, its main plot, with other metaphors (such as those of *homo faber*, *homo oeconomicus*, *homo politicus* and *homo sociologicus*) as its subplots. Those other metaphors become ways of «recounting or accounting for human choice and action»,[21] that can be expressed in poetic, narrative forms. The narrative forms, on the other hand, regardless of their individual characteristics, are ways of relating a 'truth' about the human condition. Finally, the *homo narrans* metaphor implies that symbols are created and communicated as stories, aiming at giving order to human life and to find ways of living in communities, through the recognition of each other's stories, because, as Burke suggests, one's life is a story that participates in the stories of those who have lived, who live now and who will live in the future, in an unending stream.[22] Moreover, the narrative paradigm is valid for any form of society, as it is intrinsic in human nature and the «refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself», as stressed by White.[23] Narratives enable us to understand the actions of others, as well as our own, being, therefore, intrinsically moral and capable of helping in the solution of moral problems, regarding the individuals and their societies. Again, in White's words: «Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moral impulse is present too».[24] Most importantly, narrative rationality, which is deeply descriptive in its nature, is a capacity that we all have, it is a form of «obvious knowledge», truly democratic; it is not, as traditional rationality, a normative one, something to be learned, requiring a high degree of self-consciousness, and, inevitably, hierarchical. Along with Aristotle, the narrative paradigm believes that people have a natural tendency to prefer the true and the just.[25] That certainly doesn't mean that people can't be wrong, but it warns against the danger of letting a small élite decide for everyone. All people can be rational in the narrative paradigm, as it is unconsciously acquired from experience in every culture, whereas it is not the case for the rational world paradigm, where only experts can argue rationally with other experts about specific fields, leaving no ground to the public, which remains a simple spectator. On the other hand, some stories can be better than others, more coherent and truer, in relation to the way people and the world are, in fact and in value, and as they better satisfy the criteria of the logic of good reasons, that is, attention to reason and values. It is in the careful choice of the better stories, for our own well-being, of the communities and of the world we inhabit, that lies the key for a wise and beneficial use of the immense treasure of narratives that we have inherited and that we continue to expand relentlessly, aware, today more than ever, of its power, both to build and destroy.

We cultivate, we raise, we draw water, we build. We know how to feed and protect our body and fulfil its needs. The storytelling revolution is teaching us that our inner,

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action. Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968, pp. 3-24.

[23] Hayden White, *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, «Critical Inquiry», 7, 5, 1980, p. 6.

[24] Ivi, p. 26.

[25] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. by Rhys Roberts & Ingram Bywater, New York, The Modern Library Press, 1954.

narrative worlds deserve the same attention if we want to find order in chaos, and a way to glimpse, if not to reach, the true objects of our desires. As a matter of fact, many authors have spoken about the 'narrative turn' that, starting from the second half of the twentieth century, has driven the attention of an increasing number of disciplinary fields towards narration, as a communicative form and strategy to order reality, or even the best one. As highlighted by Hyvärinen,[26] such a deep change in a variety of cultural paradigms can't be over-simplified or forced into a single, homogeneous form. He identifies at least four different narrative turns:

(i) the turn in literary theory in the 1960s;
(ii) the turn in historiography following literary narratology;
(iii) the turn in social sciences from the 1980s onwards;
(iv) the broad cultural and societal turn to narration.[27]

What emerged from this «narrative whirlpool», as Hyvärinen calls it,[28] is a strong rejection against the "realism" of the traditional biographical studies and of history in general, no longer considered as an objective, even if personal, representation of what happened in the past, but as a constructed artefact, deeply perspectivist and designed following the ubiquitous rules of narration. Suddenly, a new awareness of the difference between the narrative discourse (*how* the narration is delivered) and the story in its traditional form (*what* the narration is about) became a subject of research for scholars of several academic backgrounds, and what had always been considered a matter of poets and novelists was sublimated into a more aseptic, but also pervasive material, seeping through public and private realms, as a new-old way of understanding things, the others and ourselves. Such a profound cultural innovation, furthermore, did not remain confined to the theoretical sphere, quite the contrary. Humanistic, educational, and medical disciplines took inspiration from it, but also anticipated some of its assertion, observing in daily life the multiple manifestations of the powers of narration and developing new forms of employing them.

4. Far from theories: Narratives as remedies

As we noted, providing space and answers to the deeply human, ancestral urge for narration is essential to ensure and promote individual, as well as social, well-being. Thus, it is not surprising that literature and books have been used for many centuries in order to take care of those parts of the human inner dimension that express itself through narrations, and that strongly influence human thoughts and behaviours, from the most trivial to the life-changing. More recently, the efforts to employ narratives in a more systematic way, supported by scientific methodologies and observations, coagulated into the interdisciplinary field of Narrative Medicine, which, in turn, strongly intersected the path of bibliotherapy.

The term *bibliotherapy* is a relatively new one, as it was first used in 1916 by Samuel McChord Crothers to describe what his friend Bagster was experimenting in his Bibliopathic Institute, where he prescribed specific readings to patients with different

[26] Matti Hyvärinen, *Revisiting the Narrative Turns*, «Life Writing», 7, 1, 2010, pp. 69-82.
[27] Ivi, p. 69.
[28] Ivi, p. 70.

psychological issues .[29] However, the awareness of the extraordinary power of stories had already a millennia-long tradition, as proved by the inscription on the front door of the Ancient Library of Alexandria: «Psyches Iatreion», the «Healing Place of the Soul».

Arleen McCarty Hynes, librarian at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington D.C. and first president of the National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy (incorporated in 1983), was among the very first to systematically prescribe reading of specific books to patients with various needs, but adding a crucial, new feature: interpersonal dialogue. Hynes understood that «interactive bibliotherapy», as she called it, was the most complete way of combining the deepness of self-reflection and personal insight originating from individual reading with the multi-dimensional and multi-perspective richness of the relationship and confrontation with other people (in a group led by a bibliotherapist) or with the bibliotherapist alone. As Hynes wrote:

> When the use of literature, as self-created or written by others has either enriched the mental images and concepts of the participants, enlightened them about self, enlarged their relationships with others and/or enhanced their ways of relating to the world about them, bibliotherapy has achieved its overall goal of providing persons with ways of coping with life more gracefully and of dealing creatively with what cannot be changed.[30]

More formally, Hynes and her daughter, Mary Hynes-Berry, enumerate four main goals that the bibliotherapist should work to help the participants achieve:

> (i) to improve the capacity to respond by stimulating and enriching mental images and concepts and by helping the feelings about these images to surface;
> (ii) to increase self-understanding by helping individuals value their own personhood and become more knowledgeable and more accurate about self-perceptions;
> (iii) to increase awareness of interpersonal relationships;
> (iv) to improve reality orientation.[31]

The stories and literary texts provided by bibliotherapy, therefore, have the power to stimulate the mind and the imagination, allowing the readers/listeners to temporarily escape the narrow boundaries of time and space, and to create visions of what is, to understand it better, of what was, to accept and learn from it better, and what could be, to shape it better and prepare themselves to face it. In order to accomplish the bibliotherapeutic goals, on the other hand, great relevance is recognized to the cathartic moment of the bibliotherapy trajectory. The word 'catharsis' was used by Aristotle to describe the release of the deepest emotions caused by the complete identification of the audience with the hero of the tragedy, with the following purification of the souls and the creation of a new state of self-awareness and peace.[32] Caroline Shrodes, the first researcher to scientifically analyse the different stages and mechanisms of the bibliotherapy process, considered catharsis as the central part of that process, preceded by

[29] Samuel McChord Crothers, *A Literary Clinic*, «Atlantic Monthly», 118, 1916, pp. 291-301.
[30] Arleen McCarty Hynes & Mary Hynes-Berry, *Biblio/Poetry Therapy. The Interactive Process: A Handbook*, St Cloud-Minnesota, North Star Press of St. Cloud Inc., 1994, p. xxii.
[31] Ivi, p. 15.
[32] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Samuel Henry Butcher, New York, Hill and Wang, 1961.

identification with a character of the literary work and followed by insight, that brings back rational thought to explore and make sense of the emotions unleashed by catharsis.[33]

Bibliotherapy, therefore, represents both a precursor and a fruitful incarnation of the growing, multidisciplinary attention for the narrative structure of the human mind and communication, capable of influencing so many different fields, such as history, sociology, psychology, and medicine. With regards to the latter, it wasn't easy for the narrative principles to be accepted by the leading Evidence Based Medicine, but the work of scholars such as Rita Charon, founder and director of the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, contributed to the now broad acknowledgement of the importance of the patients' narratives, in order to promote their full recovery, on a psychological as well as physical level, and of the tools that can be useful to accomplish that mission, such as bibliotherapy.

Therapies based on the use of literature and other artistic forms are also increasingly finding strong empirical support, especially thanks to the progress in neuroscience, where new technologies for brain imaging have described and measured, for the first time, the extraordinary neural activity that is unleashed every time we read or listen to a story. Bibliotherapy programs around the world, therefore, have been implemented in order to channel this energy to tackle some of the most crucial social, mental and existential problems of our time.

A glaring example of the first kind of issues are the frequent outbursts of intercultural violence that torment Israeli society, seriously hindering any attempt to build a peaceful coexistence between the different communities that inhabit the region and making it extremely difficult to find a political solution to its long-lasting instability. Schools, and Arab schools in Israel in particular, deeply suffer for this situation, swinging between the two antithetical alternatives of being cradles for a new generation of citizens committed to the respect and defence of human rights, and of being a training ground for resentments and hate, mainly intercultural, both influencing and influenced by the society outside the classroom. In order to tip the scales in favour of peace and respect, educators and teachers desperately need appropriate tools that could be used to successfully address the major causes of violent behaviours among pupils: fear, prejudices and lack of role models that could tell them alternative stories of living in community. Jamal Abu-Hussain, in his *The Role of Bibliotherapy in Reduction of Violence in Arab Schools in Israel*, describes a study carried out in an Arab elementary school in Israel, where he trained six teachers in different bibliotherapy techniques,[34] aiming to handle and prevent violence among kids. Jamal Abu-Hussain chose to test the efficacy of bibliotherapy because he hypothesized that literature and stories could be a major means to communicate with pupils and to positively influence their behaviour, which he considers as:

> the result of a combination of biological, environmental and cultural factors. The individual behaves in a specific manner due to his being a human being with specific needs surrounded by different environmental and socio-cultural influencing factors that do not always coincide with those needs.[35]

[33] Caroline Shrodes, *Bibliotherapy. A Theoretical and Clinical-Experimental Study*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1950.
[34] Jamal Abu-Hussain, *The Role of Bibliotherapy in Reduction of Violence in Arab Schools in Israel*, «American Journal of Educational Research», 4, 10, 2016, pp. 725-730.
[35] Ivi, p. 725.

Violence, from this perspective, arises from the discrepancy between individual needs and the external factors that often hinder their satisfaction, along with the weakening authoritative and educational roles of families, schools, and other traditional institutions. In Roger's words,[36] it is when the congruity between the self and the ideal self is dethroned by the incongruity between the two that anxiety and fear take control, conditioning both actions and thoughts. The experiment led by Jamal Abu-Hussain showed that bibliotherapy was able to reduce the level of violence among pupils, in comparison with the control group that didn't go through the bibliotherapy program. The stories that had been chosen, especially narratives and folk stories that could help reflection on violence-related topics, such as feelings of helplessness, fear, and lack of control, brought to light and consciousness the most hidden feelings and issues of the violent children, who were able to observe them, maybe for the first time, through the lenses of narration, critic, but non-judging. Thanks to the help of the trained teachers-bibliotherapists, the young participants managed to get in touch with their deepest desires and, reading about characters suffering from similar existential pains, found new words to express them, along with new cognitive ways and behaviours of coping with them, this time non-destructive, but sense-making. Moreover, by understanding their problems through the involvement with others' (even if fictional), the kids learned how to understand and accept needs and behaviours different from their own, thus fostering social coexistence. Given the results of this and similar experiments, schools and teachers all over the world should seriously consider employing bibliotherapy as a comprehensive strategy to address severe social and individual problems such as violence among students, but also bullying, self-confidence, empowerment, and, as we will now examine, eating disorders.

Bibliotherapy, in all its different forms, is indeed widely used in the treatment of eating disorders and mental illnesses that have an excruciating impact on modern societies, especially the Western ones. Given the urgent need of innovative and effective forms of treatment for this kind of disorders, many countries around the world are beginning to include bibliotherapy in their national health guidelines, such as the UK, homeland of the pioneering bibliotherapy scheme Reading Well Books on Prescription. However, many of these programs lack scientifically based theoretical explanations, and little is known about the mechanisms underlying the therapeutic (or anti-therapeutic) effects of reading. Troscianko has particularly highlighted the gap between the little academic research and theoretical accuracy of the impacts of literature on the human mind and body, on the one hand, and the lively, as well as heterogeneous and multifaceted, landscape of bibliotherapy practice.[37] In particular, she observes that many studies, although presenting themselves as interested in the role of books in therapeutic healing and recovery, consider them as merely substitutes of the human therapists, thus ignoring the specific features of the textual medium and presenting bibliotherapy simply as a cheaper version of the classic face-to-face therapy and as a form of cognitive behavioural therapy, overlooking the linguistic and literary features of the texts. Moreover, she openly criticizes the classical theories of bibliotherapy, that seem, to her, detached from reality. The major flaw in the traditional theories of bibliotherapy, in Troscianko's view, is the idea that, in order to have an effect, a text should deal with characters and situations as close as possible to the reader's and

[36] Carl R. Rogers, *The Freedom to Learn*, Tel Aviv, Sefryat Hapoalim, 1973.
[37] Emily T. Troscianko, *Literary Reading and Eating Disorders. Survey Evidence of Therapeutic Help and Harm*, «Journal of Eating Disorders», 6, 8, 2018.

provide a happy ending that should inspire the reader to follow the same path. Despite the good premises, however, Troscianko considers this concept fallacious, as it is often the case that stories extremely divergent from the reader's personal experiences, even if with a sad, or neutral ending, are exactly those that trigger deep self-reflection, capable of modifying long-standing, negative attitudes, and finally impacting on daily behaviours involving both body and mind. This would be possible because people need distances and differences to change their views on themselves and the world, whereas excessive similarities could exacerbate the self-perpetuating feedback loops that support their mental or emotional issues.

In order to provide empirical proofs to her theory, Troscianko conducted an online survey involving almost 900 people, asking them if they ever experienced eating disorders, what were their reading attitudes, and what did they think were the effects of reading fiction dealing with eating disorders and the effects of their favourite fiction genre on four body and mind dimensions: mood, self-esteem, feelings about one's body, diet and exercise habits.[38] Troscianko chose eating disorders because they represent a perfect example of the strong interconnection between cultural elements (such as the media depiction of the ideal body), embodiment aspects (such as self-harming behaviours influenced by cultural and social messages and subsequently internalized by the individual), and literary ones, especially narratives, with their power of conveying interpretations of reality. The results of the study partially confirmed the two research hypothesis, that is, that fiction about eating disorders has mainly negative perceived effects on the readers, whereas the favourite fiction genre has positive or neutral perceived effects, especially on mood and self-esteem, and that readers with a personal history of eating disorders were more negatively affected by a story dealing with a similar problem. On the other hand, the author suggests that positive and negative consequences may not be easily separable. Therefore, an effective bibliotherapy intervention is the one that takes well-calculated risks to achieve positive outcomes for the reader, after considering the complexity of the text, the reader's mind and personal history, and the reading context.

For example, a huge influence on the results of a reading activity is exerted by the reader's own interpretative filter: when the mind is deeply fixed on a specific problem, stuck into a vicious spiral of immutable, negative, self-generating thoughts, even the best self-help manual or the most inspiring classic novel can represent a real danger to the reader's well-being, as the reader unconsciously picks up from the text just the problem-related and problem-worsening material, ignoring the rest. This is the reason why, especially in the most delicate cases, where the mental, or, as Troscianko prefers, bio-psycho-socio-cultural disorder is already in an advanced state, the reading material should not directly address the disorder, but provide some broader landscape in which to include any life problem, along with possibilities to overcome it and finally reach some kind of happiness, that might not be clearly depicted in the text. Surprisingly enough, Troscianko's study also showed that a special kind of reading, namely reading for pleasure what you really like, leads to a perceived increase not only in the mental and emotional well-being, but also in the diet and exercise dimensions,[39] suggesting that every part of the complex human being can benefit from (or, in the wrong conditions, be harmed by) narratives. Reading wisely selected books, therefore, can be truly and scientifically recommended as a health enhancing activity.

[38] Ivi, p. 2.
[39] Ivi, p. 14.

At times, as we have seen, bibliotherapy can be used to directly address socio-behavioural problems, such as violence among adolescents, or bio-psychological ones, such as eating disorders. At others, bibliotherapy represents a precious aid to mitigate the side effects of a life-shattering hardship, such as cancer. Cancers, along with other serious illnesses, affect not only the patients' body, but also their mind and what we can call their "life plot", the narrations they have shaped, nourished, and developed for many years and on which memory, explanations of past events, reasons for behaviours, and dreams for the future have been built. A cancer diagnosis is like an unforeseen wave on a sandcastle, calling everything into question and threatening to leave just a blank slate without hope for any possible kind of peace and happiness. While physicians and medical researchers fight a fierce battle against the biological causes and tremendous physical effects of this disease, there is still much that can be done in order to soothe the most impalpable and deepest pains of the patients. It is on this level of human well-being that narratives, and their conscious and meditated use, can play an important role. A bibliotherapy project that took place in 2010 in Juazeiro (Ceará, Brazil), was specifically designed to "humanise" medical treatments for children with cancer, through group and individual reading sessions, storytelling, plays, and art workshops.[40] These creative activities and the aesthetic qualities of the materials employed helped children to overcome negative emotions and fears, shift their attention from the illness, and support a mental state favourable to treatment. When a patient with cancer, especially a child, bedridden or forced to live away from home and family, read or listen to a narrative, he or she has the opportunity to momentarily fly away from physical troubles, desolation and misery, to delve into someone else's experiences and find in the fictional world new reasons and new ways to keep on fighting.

These are just three examples of the many different cases that show how narration can be a way, maybe *the* way, through which our deepest desires and needs can finally find true acknowledgement, first of all from ourselves. Desire of peace with others, desire of peace with ourselves, desire of peace with our very existence. Simply telling the story of these quests, the most personal and, at the same time, universal, has proven to be a source of solace for any narrator, at any age, in any life condition and place on Earth. By collecting new data on how all this affects our brain, and, consequently, our body as a whole, neuroscientists today are adding new pieces to the majestic mosaic of narration, started so many centuries ago. New shapes, new shades of colour, new insights, that will hone our comprehension of stories and of the *homo narrans* that lives in and through them. Maybe this new understanding won't solve the narration enigma, ultimately extinguishing its burning desire. Hopefully not. But it will open us the door for more accurate interventions, for posing more precise questions at the right time to the right person, helping him or her to find a way through the chaos, to give order to the conflicting adventures of life, and sail through them not as a shipwreck survivor floating adrift, but as a wise sailor looking for the wind.

5. Changing as usual

We have travelled along the road of narrative desire, a road as long as that of human history, and we have observed narrative desire's capacity to adapt to cultures, societies,

[40] Maria Cleide Rodrigues Bernardino, Ariluci Goes Elliott & Modesto Leite Rolim Neto, *Biblioterapia com crianças com câncer,* «Informação & Informação», 17, 3, 2012, pp. 198-210.

and individuals, only to understand that its inner nature has always remained the same. We have seen how the role of such a mighty force has been differently recognized and glorified, till its recent expansion in multiple disciplinary directions, with theoretical acknowledgement of its universal value, such as expressed by the concepts of 'narrative turns' and 'narrative paradigm'. We have appreciated, with a quick, utterly non-exhaustive glance, the effects of such a prolific hybridisation in the various applications of bibliotherapy. It has been, undoubtedly, a bird's eye view in a foggy day, with many countless valleys and forests of the huge narrative planet left unexplored. Actually, it could not be otherwise. But the little we have glimpsed could be enough for us to dare some reflections about narration and its role in shaping human history, in Homer's as well as in the Netflix era. And beyond.

Are we witnessing a return to simpler forms of telling, listening and communicating, as witnessed by the success of podcasts and audiobooks? Maybe. But, as forms change, evolve, refine past ones, and foreshadow the future, something seems untouched by time and revolutions. It is our storytelling *neesh*, the need and wish for stories, but also our 'existential niche', the place we define, inhabit and present to the world, our identity, incessantly shaped by others and interwoven with their narratives, but, at the same time, distinct and unique. It is the narrative that we can write, we can read, we can judge and always change, if we are skilled enough in the timeless art by which stories can transform catastrophes into eucatastrophes.[41]

[41] John R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, London, HarperCollins, 2008.