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INSPIRATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY FROM MAURICE BLANCHOT'S PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE[1]

Private practice

language
authentic literature
therapeutic literature

Summary

The aim of this paper is to show the inspirations that psychotherapists can draw from Maurice Blanchot's philosophy of literature. The French writer, philosopher and literary theorist in his works tried to capture the relationship linking, in particular, the author of the work and the reader with the work. He based his reflections on the perspective of realizing the desire to enter into dialogue with being itself, the source experience. The search for the presence of a therapeutic dimension of literary experience consisted in separating and identifying the factors which constitute therapeutic functions of literature. The analysis of Bruno Bettelheim's theory, which describes the role of fairy tales in the child's development, allows us to specify the key elements conducive to the process of psychological integration and readers' search for personal meaning. By comparing the psychotherapeutic session to the process of creation and reception of a work of art, the psychotherapist is instructed by Blanchot as to what attitude he should adopt in order to incorporate hidden meanings among overt messages, build up emotional involvement, and accommodate emotions. The reading of Maurice Blanchot's texts proves that his considerations about the "presence of absence" (which is the presence of being), death, as well as the requirements of authentic reading are a message which, when well assimilated, can support psychotherapists in activities considered by Bettelheim as therapeutic.

1. Introduction

Long before the emergence of psychotherapy, people were interested in learning about themselves and looking for different ways to alleviate suffering based on their understanding of man and his place in the world. Given the current demands on mental health professionals, psychotherapists should draw comprehensively on past cultural achievements, including philosophy and literature. What is more – the sheer pace of change today encourages us to look for answers to emerging questions in well-considered concepts.

[1)] With thanks to Dr. Anna Wolińska for her work: „Zdziwienie/Oczekiwanie/Bezczynność. Estetyka wobec nadmiaru"

This paper focuses on the body of thought of Maurice Blanchot, framed from the perspective of the aforementioned support for psychotherapy. It serves to show how specifically the thought of this philosopher can contribute to the therapist's attitude towards the patient's experiences, which require not so much a clear answer as the courage to accompany the ambiguous. Desiring to move beyond strategies that instrumentalise and operationalise patients' experience, which, in the face of an existential crisis, only exacerbates feelings of loneliness in contact with the other person, therapists can look to the concept of authentic literature for support.

The search for an answer to the question of whether the concept of Maurice Blanchot's work carries a therapeutic dimension should begin by defining what kind of literature can be called 'therapeutic'. Since this kind of value of the work for the reader is determined by their personal relationship with the text, it is important to recognise that any work can carry a therapeutic meaning for the reader. Similarly, any conversation can have a healing dimension. However, despite this, in psychotherapy we manage to identify certain conditions that favour the emergence of this kind of experience. The delineation of the characteristics of works that carry the potential to transform our mental lives was carried out based on the works of Bruno Bettelheim [1], and therefore the formulation 'therapeutic literature' used in this paper refers to literary texts that, in his opinion, have certain characteristic features that increase the chances of supporting the healing process.

The leitmotifs of Blanchot's thought that emerge have been systematised according to the demands that Bruno Bettelheim places on therapeutic literature. The text attempts to elaborate and show how Blanchot seeks to make the absent present, thus confronting us with a difficult dimension of our existence. The philosopher encourages us to undertake a wandering whereby, being at the heart of our efforts, desires and endeavours, we can integrate experiences that are generally undesirable, shameful (such as a sense of meaninglessness, absurdity, error, failure), and go out to encounter being in itself. He goes on to show how death is linked to the dimension of giving sense and meaning, to conclude with guidance on what kind of presence these contents require of us.

2. Therapeutic dimension of the experience of literature

The question of the conditions that a fairy tale must fulfil in order to have a therapeutic function was asked in the 1970s by Bruno Bettelheim. An analysis of the work *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* [1] allows us to identify the following factors that, according to this author, increase the reader's chances of entering into a therapeutic relationship with the text.

2.1. Integration of the material of explicit and implicit content

For the Austrian psychoanalyst, literature with a therapeutic function depicted our inner life. In his view, the characters featured in these stories should be seen as representations of the id, ego and superego, which allow the child to organise the world of their inner

experiences, including their chaotic emotions [1]. The characters or events that appear in fairy tales are not elements of some world 'out there', but are reflections of 'this world within us'. Speaking of the inner life, fairy tales help the child to discover their own identity, support them in understanding themselves, they serve to normalise the psychological difficulties present in the process of growing up and integrate the personality. In wishing to place Bettelheim's assumptions in the context of contemporary neuroscience research, reference can be made to the work *Attachment in Psychotherapy* by David J. Wallin [2]. The author shows that patients may lack the words to communicate their most important experiences for developmental reasons (this applies to experiences that occurred before the development of language skills), or defensive reasons – we cannot talk about some experiences or even think about them because they could threaten the sustainability of ourselves or our relationships. We find that we are unable to verbalise many significant experiences that have shaped or are shaping us in a significant way, due to overwhelmingly painful emotions blocking our verbal forms of expression. Sometimes this knowledge lies outside the realm of our language, not because we would find it difficult to bear, but because of the way in which it has been communicated to us – outside language. These contents, absent from our consciousness but alive in us in various ways, continue to influence who we are and how we behave.

This material does not belong to the set of 'explicit' but rather 'implicit' memory, which is not symbolic and therefore cannot be reflected upon. Therefore, we may perceive these contents as 'familiar' rather than 'recalled' [2]. As Wallin, citing the experience from his psychotherapeutic practice, argues, 'that which we cannot verbalize, we tend to enact with others, to evoke in others, and/or to embody' [2, p.121]. This knowledge, therefore, is expressed not so much in words, but in behaviour, emotions (those we experience ourselves, but also those that others experience in our presence), the body posture adopted, and what we expect from relationships with others. The task of the psychotherapist is to integrate these contents into the field of explicit knowledge, so that they are not suppressed or taken out in action, but can just become lived in a conscious way. The fairy tale allows us, in a safe way, because it is not direct, to approach in words or pictures content that for various reasons may have been unclear and implicit for the child.

2.2. The ability of a text to evoke emotional involvement in the reader, which encourages the construction of personal meaning

Thomas Fuchs points to two dimensions in which we experience ourselves. Both the core self (the basic self – the sense of 'mineness', 'selfhood', given without reasoning, in silence) and the narrative (extended) self are components of our self-awareness [3]. The inclusion of both dimensions in the therapeutic encounter is essential for the success of the process, because, as Fuchs writes, 'Despite this complex and dialectical structure, the extended self always remains based on prereflective self-awareness' [3, p. 551].

In his conception of the therapeutic function of fairy tales, Bruno Bettelheim draws attention to the need to leave the child in interpretive understatement. Bettelheim himself

emphasises the importance of the individual meanings given by his little patients, who experienced the fate of Hansel and Gretel or Rapunzel in different ways, but always from the point of view of their own situation [1].

According to Fuchs, the integration of the contents of the basic and extended self, being a complex interaction of biological, psychological and social processes [3], requires special conditions. The reader or listener of a fairy tale must have the space for their own reading of the text, otherwise they are in danger of being objectified in relation to an omniscient other, of being locked into a world of already constituted meanings (the development of the narrative self then does not proceed on the basis of the primary self). Bettelheim takes a similar view when he writes: 'we grow, we find meaning in life and security in ourselves by having understood and solved personal problems on our own, not by having them explained to us by others' [1, p. 19]. A key element in this harmonious development of the self is affect. In Deleuze's view, affect, which is able to seize us involuntarily and make us engage, is a much stronger catalyst for thought than rational insight [after: 4, p. 218]. Ernest van Alphen argues that it is a mistake to contrast affective reading with meaning-seeking reading. Acknowledging the role of affect means that we still arrive at certain interpretations, but more slowly, with a greater chance of going beyond conventional meanings and opening up to the hitherto unknown. Our thinking then carries a transformative potential – we begin to think ethically rather than moralistically [4, p. 237].

2.3. The ability of the reader's companion to contain and tolerate the affect evoked

From the perspective of the therapeutic effect of literature, it is important that the aforementioned affect, on the basis of which successive layers of meaning are built, can develop in the reader rather than being suppressed (unadmitted) or taken out in action (through, for example, the comforting intervention of a parent or a premature interpretation). For Bettelheim, it seems important that the parent does not distort the picture of reality in the desire to protect the child, but allows the child to explore it so that it can then be accepted. The psychoanalyst mentioned here expects therapeutic literature to play the same role in people's lives as therapy. 'Psychoanalysis was created to enable man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism.' [1, p. 8]. Just as fantasies stimulate a child's development, the content of therapeutic literature should stimulate our development by bringing us into contact with material that is important and sufficiently disturbing to be conducive to dealing with it. For this process to pass successfully, the child needs the emotional accompaniment of a parent. This shared emotional experience gives the child a sense of being understood. 'The child feels understood in his most tender longings, his most ardent wishes, his most severe anxieties and feelings of misery, as well as in his highest hopes' [1, p. 154]. In psychotherapy, this process is known as 'containment'. Psychoanalyst Patrick Casement begins his description of the key dynamics of this process by depicting strong affects which, unable to be experienced by the person experiencing them because of their intensity, must be received and experienced, as it were, in relationship with another person. Without such support, affect tends to be suppressed (which may give rise

to psychosomatisation) or replaced by action (most often destructive to the individual, as it bypasses consciousness). Containment is a form of coping with a person's difficult feelings [5]. All of this shows how the relationship with a caregiver, whether able to accept the child's emotions or not, can strongly influence the formation of the psyche.

Bettelheim argues that literature is able to guide us through the process of finding the meaning of our own existence, which makes it possible to speak of its therapeutic dimension. Self-awareness is a prerequisite for exercising the freedom available to us – self-realisation. Moreover, postmodern psychotherapeutic currents draw attention to the role of narrative in the healing process. The ability to experience the widest possible spectrum of feelings, on the basis of which we build our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, agreeing to experience reality as it is, seems to be the crowning work of our maturation. Literature can undoubtedly help with this.

What seems to be particularly important in this respect is the presence of themes relevant to our inner lives in literature. The way in which they are presented is not insignificant. Therapeutic literature allows the reader to engage on an emotional level so that they can reach their own meanings based on this process. All this happens through and in the company of the text (the author behind it), which makes the themes present, allows us to approach the affect, and by undertaking this work, as it were, announces that the power of these sensations can be contained.

3. The concept of Maurice Blanchot's work in the perspective of therapeutic literature

Maurice Blanchot was a French writer, philosopher and literary theorist. In his works, he sought to capture the relationship between, among other things, the author of the work, the reader and the work. He wove his reflections from the perspective of realising the desire to enter into dialogue with being in itself – the source experience. In one of his works, he presents his own understanding of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice [6]. The interpretation of this story, as if through a lens, brings together the main themes of this philosopher's thought.

A Thracian singer and poet descends into the realm of the dead to plead with the rulers of the underworld to release his wife, who died from the bite of a viper. The beauty of the song touches Hades and Persephone, they allow Orpheus to bring Eurydice out, on condition that he does not look at her until they exit the underworld. Just before the gates of Hades, Orpheus breaks his promise and turns to look at his wife, thus losing her forever.

Maurice Blanchot uses the text 'The Look of Orpheus' to illustrate what a work is and what kind of relationship, movement it requires from its author. The singer's journey for Eurydice is to go out to meet the essence of a thing, which one wishes to bring out of its realm (the night, the darkness in which it hides) to the surface of day, to make it real, to give it form. In the case of Orpheus, it is made possible by art. It gives the singer a harbinger of reaching a central point of depth. Ultimately, Orpheus forgets about his work and does not bring it to completion.

It may seem most surprising in Blanchot's proposed interpretation of the myth to read Orpheus' gesture of turning and looking at Eurydice as an expression of fidelity to the work. According to Blanchot, the artist approaches the work precisely by turning towards it. With this act, like a manifesto, he advocates the experience itself – the sanctuary of depth. The movement must be selfless, Orpheus must ruin the work, he must not have it in mind. He remains faithful to the process rather than the intended outcome. Orpheus' behaviour seems incomprehensible in the light of day, the order that we know. In this thought, Blanchot reveals to us how, in his view, we are given the essence of experience, of being, which the author tries to encapsulate in the work. When writing a work, the author wishes to capture its essence, as does the reader who wishes to understand it.

If we compare the material brought to a session by a patient to the content of a work, which would make the patient the author (i.e. the one who gives/brings out meaning – like Orpheus brings Eurydice from the underworld, not only by being an actor, but also creating interpretations, presenting understanding – creating narratives around events) and the therapist the recipient – the reader, then the reflection on the possibility of reaching a certain fixed meaning – the centre – may resemble the argument in the philosophy of literature about the limits of interpretation. In this dispute, Blanchot takes his stand (expressed, among other things, in the cited image of the myth). The psychotherapist faces the call of the Other, who seeks to touch their own essence in his presence. In Blanchot's view, this action, although necessary, is bound to fail. By engaging in this process as human beings, we reveal ourselves in our greatest longing and greatest failure at the same time – our strength of desire and constitutional weakness at the same time. The therapeutic dimension of the experience of literature, as postulated here, revealed in Maurice Blanchot's concept of the work, has this support function for the psychotherapist, in the process of accompanying the patient to the essence of their own experiences. The call to read *Death Sentence* [7] or *The Space of Literature* [8] is addressed to specialists. It is this professional group that Blanchot's thought can support in areas that are not always goal-oriented and effective, which makes them seem so unpopular nowadays, but at the same time seem advisable because of psychotherapy's ambition to develop in its participants the process of finding meaning in their own existence.

With Bettelheim's assumptions now in mind, Blanchot's concept of the work will be presented in three parts, so as to ultimately enable a conclusive juxtaposition of Bettelheim's identified dimensions of therapeutic literature with Blanchot's concept of the work in the final section.

3.1. The presence of absence

In the French author's texts, language appears to us as a prompt to reflect on existence itself. Christopher Fynsk compares the 'that' of Blanchot's language to the Heideggerian 'that' of art, offering the event of truth in a movement of simultaneous approach and withdrawal. The difference, however, is that Blanchot's 'that' implies an irreducible figurality that undermines any stability in the pose. According to this author, in Blanchot's texts

're-presentation of language is the remarking of the "imaginary" dimension of truth — the remarking of the dissimulation of Being' [9, p. 82]. By posing the question of the relationship between words and what they mean, Blanchot reveals how words, while giving access to what they refer to, simultaneously annihilate what is in question by omitting the private nature of the thing in question. The word, when evoking an entity, presents it in a form in which it is not itself. It is 'the absence of this being, its nothingness, what remains of it when it has lost its being, that is, it is only the fact that it does not exist' [11, p. 82].

A similar, albeit placed in a different context, process of detachment of words from the particular objects with which they were initially associated is presented by Thomas Fuchs, in his work *Ecology of the Brain* [10]. In his concept of embodied, relational language, this psychiatrist describes the word as a vocal gesture that initially merely supplemented the pointing gesture that was the original sign. Through the voice (the origins of language learning are linked to the spoken word, not the written word), the word as a sign has separated itself from physical movement and has already been transported to the realm of the invisible, no longer localisable medium of sound. Thus, as Fuchs goes on to explain, 'the possibilities of referencing multiply, and ultimately the sound signs can even be detached from the concrete situation.' [10, p. 196] They can point to absent objects, they can even point to 'something like' what they mean – similar, general or abstract objects. 'The gestural-iconic representation is then increasingly replaced by propositional speech, and the remaining gestures accompanying verbal speech serve more visual aspects, for example, to illustrate forms, directions, and structures that are the topic of speech.' [10, p. 196]. A word that moves into the realm of the invisible, unlocalisable medium breaks away from the material and touches the intelligible dimension – symbolised in Blanchot's texts by the brightness of day. What the words refer to are the ideas of the things they point to.

Citing a biblical text, Blanchot, and earlier Hegel, explain that what God created, Adam gave names to and thus called into another life, bringing it out of death anew. For entities to acquire meaning in their general, essential character, Adam, and after him every man, in whose existence it is inscribed to approach the given through the given meaning, had previously to annihilate them in their individual dimension. When Blanchot speaks of annihilating or killing, he is thinking of proclaiming the death of that particular thing to which the word refers. Language, unlike sight, builds its meaning not on what is given, but on the whole. It works by abstracting elements from the environment and therefore based on a distance to existence [11, p. 30]. Blanchot writes: 'I give myself a name – it is as if I am singing a mourning song for myself: I separate from myself, I am no longer my presence or my reality, but the objective and impersonal presence of my name that transcends me; its petrified stillness is for me like a tombstone looming over the void. When I speak, I negate the existence of that of which I speak, but I also negate the existence of the one who speaks; my word, if it reveals being in its non-existence, confirms at the same time that this revelation arises from the non-existence of the one who pronounces it, their ability to distance themselves from themselves, to be other than their own being' [11, p. 30]. The consequence of this for Blanchot will be to sustain the nothingness of language, which cannot be abolished by the subjectivity of the speaker. The French author writes that: 'what

is spoken is always missing something essential' [11, p. 30], and thus language does not reveal who we are and thus does not find roots in the speaker's being. The separation of entities from themselves, the disconnection from particularistic existence and presence that is accomplished by virtue of the pronunciation of the name of a thing or person, is a foreshadowing of that ultimate death to which every thing is bound. The word carries an allusion to the process of destruction, a reminder of the possibility of disconnection from a person's existence and presence, immersion in nothingness, in the likeness of the ultimate death. Hence Blanchot's words: 'When I speak, death speaks within me' [11, p. 30]. In this sentence, he confers an affirmative quality on death, as it becomes the guarantor of the meaning of words, a protection against everything sinking into absurdity.

Colloquial language is not interested in the relationship between death and words. For it, a live cat and its name are identical. This language focuses on the essence of the thing in question, even as it goes on to agree that it simultaneously excludes an aspect of its existence. It desires the resurrection of things in its name. Unlike poetic language. Consequently, literature in its narrative will not seek a fertile sense, but will rather accept the disintegration characteristic of this dimension of experience. It is from here, according to Professor Leslie Hill, that the aporia and paradox, present in the works of Blanchot himself, draw their strength [12]. Literature, by refusing to name simply, abolishes the simple sense, thereby allowing the sense of meaninglessness to exist, which is also associated with the word and in the act becomes an expression of the darkness of existence itself. Blanchot urges us to turn away from the day, that is, from 'the ability to understand and to live, the answer contained in every question' [11, p. 35], while knowing that this is impossible. This very assumption is made in the light of day. Another night is something unattainable, day is something inevitable, leaving no possibility of slipping away from it – we always explain words with words. Thanks to Blanchot, however, we can already see this day from a different perspective (stripped of its scientistic glory): 'as an impotence to disappear and not as a power to reveal; an obscure necessity and not a shining freedom' [11, p. 35]. Following the idea that reflection on language is a contribution to reflection on existence, we can see the word, like being, as an experience of the life of death, 'a life that carries death and persists in it' [11, p. 33].

3. 2. Death involved in life

According to Leslie Hill, the issue of death in Blanchot's works is not for the negative or nihilism, but for the boundless affirmation, irreducible extremity and passion of life [12, p. 61]. The French author singles out two deaths: the final one, which definitively takes away our existence, and the death we carry within us every day and which intensifies our life, makes us human. It is this first death that man tries to make possible, because it is the one that, as escaping all truth or action, finds no warranty in the world, is something doubtful. Therefore no one is certain of this death [8, p. 94]. It takes away human mortality and the possibility of death as we know it, shatters the world [11, p. 42]. To think about it is to enter the realm of that other death. For with this one man is strongly bound, he is its

guardian, by virtue of his bond with it he 'gives himself the power of a maker and gives to what he makes its meaning and its truth' [8, p. 95]. This death brings with it that possibility of non-being which paradoxically allows us to be ourselves – to speak, to work with words, to 'be without being' [8, p. 98], in the shape of words deprived of the full presence of the being to which they refer.

In the first instance, it is worth considering literature's contact with this tame death, this 'common word' in which the universal and the true are created on the basis of the 'emptiness of the grave' [11, p. 42]. The logical truth we can express is preceded by the death of things in the world, the suspension of their existence. Agata Bielik-Robson writes: 'so when language names a thing – this cat, this woman (to go back to the examples cited by Blanchot) – by naming it, it performs its destruction, while at the same time giving nothing graspable in return. It becomes the inscription of its referent or, literally speaking, its tombstone' [13, p. 146]. Through this death, we become human because we are capable of producing sense and meaning. This process was discussed during the presentation of the nature of language as understood by Blanchot. It seems important to point out that what happens on a micro scale in language, happens on a macro scale in literature. Literature as civilisation and culture is a negation that defines things, makes things finite, is, according to Blanchot, 'a work of death in the world' [11, p. 44]. Through the negation of existence, things become intelligible, gain meaning, are preserved in their being. By doing so from a place remote from that of the phenomena it describes, literature allows them to situate themselves in another moment, as part of a certain whole. However, it must be remembered that this totality claims to be fictional and lacks objectivity due to its immersion in historically determined language. Because of this, the world is beginning to see literature as an obstacle and no longer as a real help. Written work, wishing to relate only to the real, would be limited to the language of communication and consequently would not go beyond primary speech. Literature does not stop at its relationship with that death which gives words their meaning and to which it therefore owes so much. In poetic speech it begins to turn towards that death which is inaccessible. Literature then makes a shift in its focus from presence to absence, from the real to the unreal. Desiring contact with an existence that escapes all classification, it ceases to explain and bring understanding on its own. Literature, in its ambiguity, is no longer limited to the truth, but makes room for the lack of sense. A literary work gives itself over to the contradictions at work within it, keeps itself in suspension, taking no certain form. Ready to transform at any moment, plunged into confusion, it goes beyond meaning, it is the maintenance of a double meaning. Communing with this power of negation makes us realise that the sign can change at any moment and, as Blanchot writes, 'meaning no longer signifies the miracle of understanding, but refers us to the nothingness of death, and comprehensible being only signifies the rejection of existence, and the absolute quest for truth is expressed by the impotence of true action' [11, p. 49].

Blanchot's affirmative attitude to death is evident in his perception of it as a creative power. Contact with it, on the one hand, enables the production of meanings and, on the other hand, strips away the sense found, it seems to be an experience that fills literature and

us with a life of pure being. In the essay *The Essential Solitude and Solitude in the World* [8], the philosopher shows that within the world, being remains deeply hidden. The man becomes a 'self', separating themselves from their own being. The power that the self gains without being finds its grounding in community, in the work and toil of the realising world within history. It is customary to refer to 'solitude' in the world as the state in which man chooses to extend his separation from being to beings and wishes to establish himself without others. Sometimes, as Blanchot goes on to explain, 'the solitary "I" sees that it is separated' [8, p. 251]. The experience may involve feelings of trepidation.

Blanchot deepens his reflection with a presentation of the attitude we should adopt towards this discovery. By recognising one's own essence, which consists of non-being, man can not be frightened by its nature, but embrace it. By opening themselves up to what seems to be dark and frightening, they gain the freedom and power that flows from nothingness, the fact that they may not be. For Blanchot, 'Men affirm themselves by means of the power not to be: thus do they act, speak, comprehend always other than they are, escaping being by defying it – by way of a risk, a struggle which continues even unto death, and which is history' [8, p. 251]. For this philosopher, the existence of being involves precisely the absence of being. The lack of being, however, is not its pure absence but its concealment, it is being in the depths of the absence of being [8, p. 252]. In 'essential solitude', when the acting, differentiating self disappears, what is revealed is the concealment of being itself. In everyday life, concealment hides itself, Blanchot writes, and in action becomes a force of negation, whereas when beings are missing and it appears overtly, it takes the form of 'everything has disappeared', the lack reveals the essence of being [8, pp. 252].

Similarly in literature. The contradictions, the divisions, the diverse demands that make up its ambiguity mean that specific senses and meanings cannot stand, and literature becomes a place for revealing the hiddenness of being itself. Just as being is not absent but hiding, this force present in the depths of language is also present in its sense. Blanchot shows that behind both the meaning of words and their return to existence is the same 'force both friendly and hostile, a weapon made to build and destroy' [11, p. 48]. The power of negation, which the philosopher calls death, working in the depths of language brings truth into the world [11, p. 49]. This truth, however, can be discarded at any time in favour of the absolute truth, the desire for contact with existence itself expressed in the impotence to act. Opening up to this type of movement allows us to incorporate into our experience a dimension hitherto absent and yet ontologically so important, because it has to do with the very basis of all being. The aforementioned affirmative attitude towards death is confirmed in the philosopher's thought, that it is 'nothingness itself that helps create the world, nothingness is the creator of the world in a man who works and understands. Death leads to being: such is the split of a man, the source of his unhappy fate, for through man death comes to being and through man sense rests on nothingness'. For the writer, literature is a place where, in contact with the truth and sense of words, a movement is undertaken beyond meanings, beyond this possible death, towards an encounter with that which apparently no longer has value and sense, in which it is impossible to find support, towards being.

3.3. The requirement for distance

The intrinsic dynamic of the word makes it a place of agreement between existing and a being. God's revealed word is the area in which people have a relationship with the one who 'excludes all relationships' [14, p. 65]. Invoking Jewish traditions, Blanchot presents the word as an act of covenant with 'the infinitely Distant and absolutely Foreign' [14, p. 65] – God himself.

The characterisation of the word as situated beyond the simple opposition of alienation or assimilation is evident in the text *The Indestructible. Being Jewish* [14]. We learn from it that we cannot assimilate the word given to us, make it into something fully tamed, because in this dialogical understanding distance is maintained. For the word does not abolish difference, but preserves it. In conversation, entities do not have to deny themselves in favour of the universal, but are embraced in their Foreignness. By finding value in remoteness and separation, the word allows us to find 'settlement' in exile. In words, we search for the meaning and sense of the experience of our exile, existence, foreignness, externality – all that is, by definition, unassimilable. As not claiming the right for the one who receives it to feel at home, it invites one to make a move to the Outside, to make a move 'in which the Foreign can liberate himself without denying himself' [14, p. 66]. Recognising the inaccessibility, separation and detachment of the Other, Blanchot goes on to emphasise the human presence as a gift and a miracle. In writing about this, he refers to the words of Jacob, who says to Esau 'I see you as God is seen' rather than 'I have seen God as I see you' [14, p. 67]. Although in the presence of another person one feels their distance, an encounter with a man 'distant' in the image of God himself cannot be experienced solely in terms of alienation. In the history of the Jewish people, according to Blanchot, our relationship to this difference, which appears with the presence of the Other, is evident. Foreignness is a commitment to responsibility, but more often than not it carries the risk of rejection, disgust, embarrassment, negating the other in an act of power.

The difficulty of respecting the distance of this difference, irreducible to the self, is also experienced in the face of the work. Maintaining this gap between a completed work, the world, the reader or oneself seems demanding due to the emerging fear of emptiness. This free space invites it to be filled with a valuating judgement that at the same time deprives the work of the possibility of making itself present in the act of living communication. The void that the reader or interlocutor should sustain carries with it the memory of the emptiness that accompanied the creation of the work, a reminder of its openness and of the tensions arising from the presence of opposing moments. Blanchot contrasts reading, which is presence in the face of the work, with critical reading by a specialist. In attempting to classify the work, to evaluate it, to put it in front of a barrage of questions, the viewer defends himself against an unpredictable experience. According to Blanchot, on the other hand, it is only by maintaining this distance that it is possible to communicate with the very depth of the work, its vitality. An authentic reading in which the work finds all its anxiety, but also the richness of lack and the uncertainty of emptiness, requires the reader to touch these dimensions within themselves. Uniting with these aspects of the work exposes the reader to feelings of desire as well as trepidation [8]. The presence of depth in the work

emerges by respecting the distance from its foreignness. It is the presence of depth given at a distance. In this way, the work never becomes fully tamed, it always remains open to new senses.

In the end, the work is not saved from stillness and some interpretation is attributed to it. In the course of the changes and transformations inherent in its very source, the life of the work is completed within the world. By taking this moment into account in his concepts, Blanchot not only familiarises us with the requirement to read authentically, but also, by confronting us with the impossibility of remaining constantly in this moment of suspension of all meaning, allows us to embrace and accept what seems inevitable and is also part of our experience. In this way, he does not negate the realness of the reality in which we live and which requires us to stand up for values, he demands a truth that brings hope of resolution. By recognising the value of the moment of filling the void with content, incorporating this utility into the essence of the work, the dialectic of art that 'is affirmed in a presence which is also disappearance' [8, p. 205], Blanchot protects us from dogmatism, another fixation that carries the spectre of objectification. The man, like the work of art, realises himself outside of himself and so, like the work of art, 'instead of getting all its reality from the pure, contentless affirmation that it is, it becomes an enduring reality, containing many meanings which it acquires from the movement of time or which are perceived variously according to culture's forms and the exigencies of history' [8, p. 205].

Blanchot's thought is not nihilistic, despite continually confronting us with the fact that being itself always eludes the attempt to grasp it. The philosopher writes: 'But it is also true that the Eumenides have still never spoken, and that each time they speak it is the unique birth of their language that they announce. Long ago they spoke as enraged and appeased divinities before withdrawing into the temple of night – and this is unknown to us and will ever remain foreign. (...) that must be combated in order for there to be justice and culture – and this is only too well known to us. Finally, one day, perhaps they will speak as the work in which language is always original, in which it is the language of the origin. And this is unknown to us, but not foreign' [8, pp. 205-206]. Somewhere between another night and the brightness of day, there is a work of art which, recognising in advance the failure of its project, makes the effort to go out towards the Outside, the Other. The failure is not total, however, since, according to Blanchot, 'reading and vision each time recollect, from the weight of a given content and along the ramifications of an evolving world, the unique intimacy of the work, the wonder of its constant genesis and the swell of its unfurling.' [8, p. 206]. Once again, Blanchot confirms his affirmative attitude to that which involves lack and absence, which conceal the very truth of being – its nothingness.

4. Translating the thoughts of Maurice Blanchot into the psychotherapeutic experience

A well-grounded knowledge of the fundamental human experience of the world seems to be particularly useful in view of the expectations placed on therapists to propose effective and quick solutions. Given the reported desire of patients in psychotherapy offices

to experience relief from their suffering, the temptation to offer an *ad hoc* solution is extremely high. Christopher Bollas in his book *Meaning and Melancholia. Life in the Age of Bewilderment* writes explicitly about the demands for quick-fix assurances that are placed on professionals working in the field of mental health today [15, p. 59]. The author draws attention to the new forms of thinking that are emerging with the revolution of information technologies. According to Christopher Bollas, in the 'fastnet' world, speed is valued more highly than reflection and drawing conclusions. Currently, a psychoanalyst is seen as a provider of insights rather than a companion in the process of exploration. Bollas points out the increasing difficulty of maintaining attention with internal experiences – memories, feelings. Instead, we are increasingly keen to focus on what is around us, seeking new experiences in the surrounding world. This process undermines our ability to create personal interpretations, we lack interest in the various meanings that emerge when we direct our consciousness inwards. In the age of operationalisation, we are looking for the best solutions, and this is also what we expect from the professionals we report to [15]. Just a brief reflection makes us realise that applying the approach described by Bollas to an existential crisis can only deepen our despair, loneliness and sense of aimlessness. Giving up introspective thoughts and engagement, which are manifestations of psychic retreat, are intended to eliminate the pain that plagues us, but in effect lead us to subjecticide [15, p. 65].

The process described above is the opposite of the attitude Blanchot encourages us to adopt. In their desire to resist the operationalisation and instrumentalisation of the psychotherapeutic relationship, mental health professionals can draw on the philosopher's reflections, which foster an openness to another dimension of the relationship. Using the theory of therapeutic literature articulated by Bruno Bettelheim, the essence of which lies in creating opportunities for the integration of explicit and implicit meanings, we can see that Blanchot allows us to attach and make desirable content that is uncomfortable and yet so valuable and crucial to the very nature of our 'being' in the world. By showing that writing should not be limited to capturing the truth, the philosopher opens up the dimension of erring and error. Before things are named and put into clear categories, they are experienced as incomprehensible, undifferentiated. The moment we allow ourselves to be in touch with what surrounds us can be frightening and confusing, as things not narrowed down to their ideas, not yet having clear boundaries, are uncertain. Blanchot can therefore support therapists in the movement of opening up to the unknown, in the courage to wander. He may remind them that their task is not to bring Eurydice to the surface of day, but to try to get closer to the truth of being, which, although unreached, is closest to us in those moments when our experience is not confined to certain concepts, but remains open to a multiplicity of meanings and senses.

Just as a work is full of contradictions and contradictory moments, each of us carries within us a wealth of past sensations, messages, a diversity of aspirations, which we most often experience in the form of internalised conflicts and internal tensions. To put up with these ambivalences, to lock ourselves into some defined and culturally acceptable narrative, is one of the most frequently chosen strategies, which at the same time threatens to reduce our experiences to some specific dimension. Such a stance runs the risk of aiming

for a simplistic understanding of ourselves and others, as only such a strategy allows us to reduce the entire complexity of life to a psychopathology that is clear to us and to implement action aimed at reducing the suffering we perceive as far from what we consider to be the norm. Being at the heart of expectations (their own and the patient's), the therapist can choose the way of Orpheus, remain faithful to inspiration and turn towards the unknowable 'truth of being', thus giving up the act of bringing the work from the depths of night onto the surface of day. By accepting the untranslatability of experience, the therapist, like Orpheus, sets himself up for failure, futility and defeat. This risk, however, is made to the fidelity of the very being of the work or patient. With only the final outcome in mind, i.e., for example, the therapist's own desire to be effective in helping, which brings recognition and good self-worth, the therapist would remain unfaithful to the work (i.e., the experiential dimension of the patient's life), its processuality. The patient himself tries to encapsulate his being in a certain narrative. In attempting to put into words this sense of his own being, the patient becomes the author of a work – seeking/creating the meaning of his own experience. Therefore, the risk of objectification is not only present in the psychotherapeutic relationship. The patient also creates this risk for himself. To avoid this, we should be like the writer in Blanchot's works, elusive in 'who we are', 'we no longer are' or 'we are about to be'. Stopping at some particular, frozen form excludes our other aspects of experience and hinders the process of integrating them. One might venture to say that, like the writer from the philosopher's works, we are 'eternally absent in our presence' [11, p. 18].

Encouraging us to stay beyond settled sense, to nurture in ourselves the movement to go beyond the familiar and the known, Blanchot shows us how to keep ourselves in that moment where everything is still possible and nothing has to come at the cost of losing presence. His texts, used by psychotherapists, can be read as an exhortation to give up possession in a relationship. What often remains hidden in therapists' offices is precisely the shameful dimension of the specialist's ignorance. Blanchot shows that the therapist of the client's being can seek not only after the Heideggerian example – as the being of some being – but also through being itself, that is, beyond sense and meaning, in the invisible. Then it is not humility that the therapist should adopt in the face of their ignorance, but an active search for contact with the Unknown in the patient. To give up the desire to define is to embrace the Other in their difference and not to reduce them to one's own horizon of experience. Blanchot confronts us with the difficult discovery that the truth of being, which we most often see in language as a reservoir of meanings, is in fact not hiding there. It is itself something much broader that transcends our categories and eludes our ability to grasp it. Therefore, the therapist should become a Noah who does not try to protect creatures by appealing to their general and essential nature, but makes a move opposite to that of Adam naming entities, and immerses them in the flood of the indefinable – the night – thus opening up to their individual being beyond the façade of their existing life. In this act, the therapist must expose himself to his own fragility, his own insignificance. Without focusing on the essence of the thing in question, he moves from primary speech, which gives the appearance of an unchanging, always present, handy truth, to a literary

language that carries with it anxiety, a desire to reach the absence of meaning and a lack of agreement with what seems objective. Coming to meet what is lost, poetic language attempts to integrate the experience of death, of loss, is an awareness of the presence of the absence of that which gives life to the word – a whole wealth of experiences. To accept disintegration is not to exclude from our experience what is difficult and undesirable, it is not only to be ready to endure what appears with the absence of a fertile sense (and suffering is the kind of experience whose attempts to understand and make sense are made within human cultural and religious activity), but to follow and accept everything that happens, according to Jolanta Brach-Czaina's words: 'What we encounter is only a small part of the events occurring in the world, so nothing should be rejected, because we are not given much to experience in the tight, outwardly limited area of existence. So everything that happens and that we do remains to be received with admiration' [16, p. 50]. To allow the absence of meaning to exist is, as we read in the analysis of Blanchot's texts, to stand back and allow the darkness of existence itself. The loss of a child, another loved one, a disability, an experience of violence, an incurable illness, feelings that are irrational from the perspective of others (fears, sadness), a hostile attitude towards oneself, are just some of the reports that are vividly experienced by patients in psychotherapy offices, and which are sometimes difficult to make sense of and fit into the existing narrative of life. If the therapist were to turn away from the brightness of day in the face of these events, it would mean not going down the path of understanding and providing answers, but of being, of allowing oneself all the incomprehension and absurdity of these experiences. Bearing in mind Bruno Bettelheim's requirement for therapeutic literature, it is difficult not to acknowledge Blanchot's works' transformative power of influence, based on its readiness to address themes relevant to our inner lives. Blanchot's texts, read in psychotherapists' offices, can be seen as an appeal for the presence of what is usually absent in them, an affirmation of meaninglessness, defeat, failure, ambiguity, loss – in a word, of everything that offers the possibility of a faithful experience of our reality, without excluding from it that which does not correspond to our desires or ideas about it.

The psychotherapist, sensitised by Blanchot's thought to the fact that words that allow us to point to the essence of a certain thing at the same time carry with them the death of the individual, exclude that which does not fall into the category of the general, becomes more cautious in their use. This reflection allows him, in the manner of a parent reading a fairy tale to a child, to leave the patient in an emotional opening devoid of simple conceptualisation and autobiographical knowledge, which serves to engage in the process of searching for one's own meanings. Reflecting on death in Blanchot's work allows us, on the one hand, to appreciate the meaning of the words we use and, on the other, to go beyond the importance of the meanings we ourselves assign. The philosopher shows in his texts that our attempts to come closer to being in words are doomed to fail and, at the same time, this narrowed dimension of experience that shows itself in words, this absence, protects us from the absurd, is a guarantee of some kind of graspable meaning. Through language, we belong to a world that requires us to achieve and fulfil various goals. The death we know in the world allows us to rob entities and ourselves of pure existence. It allows us to com-

municate and act effectively, limiting our own being to a defined 'self'. The power of not being that each of us has is the possibility to define ourselves in this world, who we are, seeing ourselves from the perspective of the history of this world. The awareness that our identity is built on the capacity for non-being, our eschewing of being, gives this act the appropriate gravity and responsibility. To say of someone 'you are this and that' is at the same time to deprive them of the possibility of being. It is clear, in view of this, that the onus of engaging in the process of discovering who one is becoming as a self should be on the patient, not on the diagnosing psychotherapist. Becoming curious about what remains absent from the word provokes thinking about another death that is not available to us in any way. It is an area of experience that awakens in the patient and therapist a desire for clarification that cannot be assuaged by any action. In the realm of existential experience, we can only get closer to certain meanings, but we can never fully grasp them. The words of Jolanta Brach-Czaina, already quoted, can serve as an explanation: 'By interpreting simple existential phenomena, we expose ourselves to a search for a meaning perhaps not indicated by them. We take the risk of believing that our presence in the world can be understood and valuable. This is a situation incomparably more difficult than that of an interpreter of cultural facts, since these are called to understanding and values from the outset. And also – once placed in a cultural circle – they evoke further circles of culture, as accompanying and explanatory meanings. Existential facts are bare in comparison. Interpreting them is closely linked to the possibility of questioning the meaningfulness of our presence in the world. If they are absurd events and therefore devoid of meaning and value, so is our presence. Thus, the search for the meaning of elementary existential facts, such as childbirth, the sexual act, the act of eating, is – or is not – legitimate to the same extent as any interpretation and adjudication of existence. These are not questions that can be clearly answered. One can only tease. One must' [16, p. 47]. In the absence of clarity about the meaning of existential experiences, it is unlikely to come from outside – in the form of a psychotherapist's interpretation. Even if these are provisional meanings, for, as Blanchot writes, to grasp this absolute truth of being resting on nothingness is something impossible, what seems essential is that they are produced by way of full engagement by the one they are meant to serve. The writer and reader in Blanchot's case, like the listener to a fairy tale in Bruno Bettelheim's case, must have the space to enter into a personal dialogue with a life's oeuvre.

Thinking of containment, i.e. the accommodation of affect by the person accompanying the child in the therapeutic process taking place using fairy tales as the last of the listed requirements of therapeutic literature, we can without much difficulty point out how this phenomenon is present in Blanchot's works. The philosopher supports our process of tolerating difficult feelings that arise when interacting with the other. By encouraging us to cultivate distance, a space not filled with judgements, it creates the possibility to engage in a lively dialogue in which the Foreign will not be dominated, reduced or negated. The philosopher is aware that Foreignness and difference terrifies, evoking the experience of emptiness and tension always present between contradictions, opposing moments. However, he encourages us to tolerate these states within ourselves, in favour of communing with the sheer depth of

the work. Psychotherapists, inspired by reading Blanchot's texts, become more attentive to the very act of asking questions, classifications, evaluations, which can be an expression of their dominance and defences against the unpredictable. Blanchot can inspire therapists to create space for authentic reading, getting in touch with the vitality of the patient. The presence of another person, despite their distance, is a gift to Blanchot. The words of another French thinker, Paul Ricoeur, may be helpful in understanding the nature of the distance in contact with the other that emerges here: 'My experience cannot directly become your experience. An event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another stream of consciousness. Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you. Something is transferred from one sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. [...] The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public' [17, p. 16]. Blanchot prepares us for that moment when we are no longer able to remain in exile and we settle into some meaning or interpretation. Thanks to the effort made, however, this is already happening after we have made the effort to go to the Outside, for the benefit of the Foreign who did not have to 'deny himself' in contact with us. Contemporary research on the effectiveness of different psychotherapeutic modalities emphasises the importance of the quality of the therapeutic relationship, responsible for the changes taking place in the patient. With their concepts, both Bruno Bettelheim and Maurice Blanchot support the building of contact with the work, which allows the inclusion of a wide range of personal experiences (verbal, non-verbal) and the engagement in the process of finding (one's own) being.

Bearing in mind Bruno Bettelheim's requirements for therapeutic literature, the above analysis of Maurice Blanchot's works indicates that they are fulfilled in their entirety. Using the thoughts of the French philosopher, therapists in their relationship with the work created by the patient are supported in the movement of seeking the presence of absence. The awareness of death involved in life allows the clarity of categories to be seen without the glory previously given to them by science, to see the essence of experiences often marginalised by virtue of them not belonging to the dimension of narrowly understood truth. Taking a cue from Blanchot, therapists are strengthened in accompanying the other while preserving distance and foreignness. The philosopher teaches us that dialogue can take place with difference, without the requirement to reduce the content presented to the familiar. Reading Blanchot's texts can become a training in tolerating the tensions that arise in the absence of the presence of shared meanings.

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