

Jeney Éva

## BIBLIOTHERAPY AND LITERARY THEORY DIALOGUE AS THE COMMON DENOMINATOR OF BIBLIOTHERAPY AND LITERATURE

Bibliotherapy is a triune relation between speech, reading and speech. The threefold relation is based on the plurality of the dialogue. There are dialogical connections between the literary work and the therapist, between the literary work and the reader, and between the therapist and the reader. In bibliotherapy at least two readers talk about the same texts. Intersubjectivity and intertextuality walk hand in hand. While it is the subjects, the individuals who do the talking, the texts are also engaged in a dialogue of their own. In addition, the texts demand a verbal response from the reader. Bibliotherapy, then, should be conversational. The prejudices, while not inevitably transformed, are mutually weighed, and there is a fusion of horizons. The dialogue of this type does not necessarily lead to statements. It leads to questions and answers which, in turn, raise new questions.

Etymologically, the word *dialogue* contains not *di-*, meaning ‘two’, but *dia-*, meaning ‘over’ or ‘across’. This is significant because dialogue as a form of understanding always involves a continual shift of attention, a continual shift of focus. The etymology of the word warns us that whatever takes place between two individuals when they are speaking to one another is only the condition of something more substantial to happen. And this can be described as the mutual attention, the exchange of ideas, the transaction of meanings.

„David Bohm, one of dialogue’s most original practitioners, interprets its etymological roots as suggesting words and meanings flowing through from one participant to another.” (<http://www.previewforum.com/learningcenter/units/unit2.html>)

Philosophical dialogue is associated with Plato. Lucian’s *Dialogues of the dead* was also immensely influential. It was admired and imitated by French and British authors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Galileo Galilei, Giordano Bruno and Torquato Tasso relied on the Platonic pattern. The use of dialogue was extended during the Renaissance when it was discovered that it could be employed in language teaching as well. Today dialogue is regarded both as the tool of understanding, and as an act the participants of which interact and cooperate in order to achieve some common goal. The practice of bibliotherapy is very close to the theory and applicability of dialogue. One could argue that such extreme cases as autism, schizophrenia and paranoia, characteristic of the pathology of talking, are nothing but the inability to pay attention and to respond in an appropriate manner.

Martin Buber writes that “In the beginning there is relation.” His philosophy departs from the statement that existence “is not in itself” but it is always a relation. Buber looks upon understanding as a relation between somebody performing an act of understanding and something understood.

“The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.

The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.

The basic words are not single words but word pairs.

One basic word is the word pair I—You.

The other basic word is the word pair I—It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.

Thus the I of man is also twofold.

For the I of the basic word I—You is different from that of the basic word I—It.”  
(Martin Buber *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York. 1970. 53.)

The idea of the encounter has a central role in Carl Rogers’s world. Interpersonality, meeting the other, experiencing the group are of decisive importance in encounter groups. Personality is not opposed to the group, it complements it. In this conception, just like in the humanistic psychological views, the responsibility of the person is emphasized. This is the responsibility of an individual who oversees all the decisions concerning his or her own life. This is true even if the ability to control the decisions happens to be limited or suspended. In terms of bibliotherapy this means that the quest for self-realization and development are fundamental urges. This process cannot be superseded but only temporarily hindered by breakdowns or mental illnesses. The task is, therefore, to bring out something that is already in there. This something can be either the disposition to move toward development, self-realization, or toward a unified life narrative. Bringing something out in this sense is no small task. Whoever undertakes it, must see herself or himself as a person, and must be related as a person to others. The client is a misnomer. It reifies the other. In bibliotherapy the encounter takes place between persons open to each other, assisting each other’s self-realization, understanding oneself from the other and the other from oneself.

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s fusion of horizons sheds light on understanding as a process and activity.

“Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. Thus we do not relate the other’s opinion to him but to our own opinions and views. Where a person is concerned with the other as individuality – e.g., in a therapeutic conversation or the interrogation of a man accused of a crime – this is not really the situation in which two people are trying to come to an understanding.” (Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. Continuum, New York. 1994. 385.)

Everybody brings into the conversation his or her prejudices, views, perspectives, horizon of understanding, and tries to understand the opinions of the other in their relation to his or her own opinions. Understanding the opinions of the other does not make it necessary to agree with them. The prejudices, while not inevitably transformed, are mutually weighed, and there is a fusion of horizons. The dialogue of this type does not necessarily lead to statements. It leads to questions and answers which, in turn, raise new questions.

Paul Grice's cooperative principle approaches dialogue from a different direction. Not every type of conversation in every culture is ruled by cooperation. However, without cooperation, human interaction and understanding would be more difficult if possible at all. Grice's cooperative principle is broken down into the four Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner.

#### *Maxim of Quality*

Be Truthful

Do not say what you believe to be false

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

#### Maxim of Quantity

Quantity of Information

Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

#### Maxim of Relation

Relevance

Be relevant.

#### *Maxim of Manner*

Be Clear

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

Marc Alain-Ouaknin shows the dialogical nature of bibliotherapy by pointing out the parallels with the world of the Talmud (Marc Alain-Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie: Lire, c'est guérir*; Paris, Seuil, 1994). The word *Talmud* comes from the root *lmd*, meaning "teach, study". The Talmud consists of two parts, the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah is the compendium of the Jewish oral traditions called the "Oral Torah". The Gemara is the rabbinical analysis of and the commentary on the Mishnah. However, it is not a systematic exposition of the Mishnah, but a collection of the divergent oral traditions of interpreta-

tion. The Gemara treats every aspect of the Mishnah as a subject of close investigation. The explanations of the Gemara provides juxtapose a variety of possible questions, hypotheses and answers, aiming at a comprehensive interpretation of the Mishnah. The method the Gemara employs is fundamentally dialogical. It is built on debate, the interaction between somebody perceiving a potential problem (inconsistency, ambiguity, etc.) and somebody else providing a possible solution to the problem.

The Talmud is significant for bibliotherapy because it does not aim at a definitive body of eternal truths. Rather, it represents the process of argumentation leading to the discovery of unexplored avenues. The Talmud does not solidify any stage of the debate into atemporal truths. When the debate begins the text that serves as the basis of the discussion is regarded as semantically undefined, and it always remains open to new interpretations which, heterogeneous as they are (philosophical, sociological, political, linguistic, historical), can never exhaust the meaning of the text. The interpretation serves against looking upon the text as an idol. A commentary of the Talmud is a never ending journey that denies the necessity of turning each passing moment into frozen images of atemporal conclusions. The interpretation it provides is the "tolerance of sense/meaning". (189) Ouaknin calls the schools of Talmudic study the space of bibliotherapy not only for the passionate lifelong wish for learning, but primarily because these schools embody some form of conversational pedagogy. The dialogue is continuous both between the pupils and between the professors and the pupils. Instead of the silence of reading rooms, these schools have a background noise of parallel debates and conversations. The interpretation of the Talmud is always the centre of the discussion. The professor argues for and against the contradictory statements, and tries to maintain the calm atmosphere. These schools make the therapeutic (and anti-ideological) function of reading texts quite obvious. The interlocutors will dislodge every interpretation from its comfort zone, preventing nice, overarching syntheses.

The bibliotherapeutic conversation has the structure of the Talmudic dialogue. The word for this type of dialogue is mahloket in Hebrew. The word signifies the common space that is equally open to various vistas. Within the multiplicity of interpretations each and every point of view presupposes contradictory points of view. Every interlocutor looks upon his or her own arguments from the distance of the arguments of other interlocutors. The dialogical context is built into the individual interpretations to the extent that there are no isolated ideas. Interpretations emerge within the context of criticism, which help them resist the one-sidedness, the monologue, the illusion of self-sufficient explanation of ideologies. Thesis and antithesis do not aspire to be resolved in a synthesis. They are present in order to maintain the suspense.

The bibliotherapeutic conversation cannot, and does not intend to, finalize meaning which is always in *statu nascendi*. There is no single, final and definitive interpretation. Interpretation means a multitude of interpretations.

Ouaknin points out that the role of one of the interlocutors in the Platonic dialectic is rather limited. He is usually content with saying "Yes", "No", "Exactly", "That what I had in mind", while the other interlocutor is at the top of the hierarchy. He is the undoubted protagonist of the dialogue. In comparison, the teacher in the Talmudic school is democratic. He counts on being contradicted.

Ouaknin's model of the Talmudic school is superior to the definition according to which bibliotherapy is a relation to books, reading and interpretation. Such a practice can

even be basically solipsistic. Ouknin does not say but his Talmudic model explain why bibliotherapy works best as group therapy.

Bibliotherapy, then, should be conversational. It has a book or a text as a medium. Ouknin compared the role the book plays in bibliotherapy to the role the drawings have in Donald Winnicott's "squiggle game". Winnicott regarded drawing as the medium of communication in his therapy. The piece of paper going back and forth between the child and the therapist provides a tool for discovering traumas in the unconscious. The consultation – just like reading in bibliotherapy – begins with words of world creation: "we shall draw". In turns, the therapist would draw a shape and invite the child to make something of it, and the child would draw a shape for the therapist to do something with it. As soon as something appears on the paper, it will become accessible, and it will become possible to talk about it. A clean sheet of paper teems with possibilities for mutual projections. As opposed to a hierarchy, the relation between therapist and child becomes symmetrical, suitable to be filled with confidence and mutual trust. The "squiggle game" is usually regarded as an introductory stage within the therapy. It is a tool rather than a goal. Ouknin, however, emphasizes that the game makes it possible for the encounter to take place between the therapist and the child. This kind of drawing does not have a predetermined set of rules going back to a closed system. The parallel between the "squiggle game" and bibliotherapy seems rather obvious. Each new line provides a potentially novel interpretation, incomplete in itself, which can only be completed by its continuation by the other.

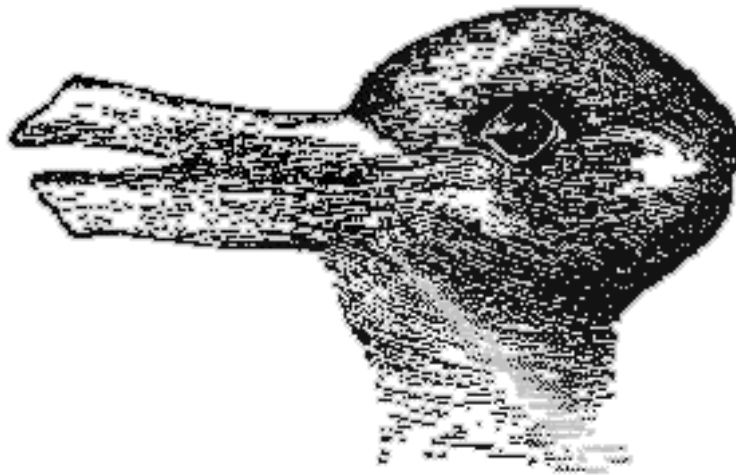
It is worth taking a look at some of the paragraphs in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Instead of trying to find the common denominator of language and reality, in his second period Wittgenstein studied language use. He thought that "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." (§43) He introduced language games to describe the various uses of language in its social context. He thought that there are philosophical problems because we are not aware of the uses of our concepts. Many traditional philosophical puzzles and confusions arise as a result of disorientation.

One of the philosophical problems has the form: "I don't know my way about." (§123.) This argument is so common in Wittgenstein's writings that Stanley Cavell put it at the centre of Wittgenstein's philosophy: "The Investigations exhibits, as purely as any work of philosophy I know, philosophizing as a spiritual struggle, specifically a struggle with the contrary depths of oneself, which in the modern world will present themselves in touches of madness." (Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, Albuquerque, N.M., Living Batch Press, 1989, 29–75.)

Whether or not this is an overinterpretation, "I don't know my way about" seems to be significant for bibliotherapy. This refers to either a moment of crisis or to a turning point when people have to reorganize their existing knowledge in order to get their bearings. This can be achieved by looking at the problem from a different perspective. Wittgenstein calls this *Aspektwechsel*. This involves a complete reevaluation of all our knowledge about the world. And this reevaluation is entirely linguistic. "I don't know my way about" offers the possibility of starting a new language game that can handle the crisis and the disorientation.

A perceptually ambiguous figure originally was introduced by the Gestalt psychologist J. Jastrow, and published in his book *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (1900). The figure

can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, but never both at the same time. The change from duck to rabbit, or from rabbit to duck is always sudden, bringing about surprise.



This change of aspect is actually quite close to Winnicott's "squiggle game" in which continual change seems to be the rule, rather than an exception. The change of aspect can initiate radical innovations in the knowledge about both the world and the self.

Literary fictions abound in situations that can be described by the formula "I don't know my way about". These situations can be regarded as direct appeals to the interpreter to change his or her points of view, to reorganize his or her knowledge. Since this can only be achieved within the language by the language, literary fictions rearrange reality itself.