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The philosophical and historical context of Bion's concept of reverie and its use as a rhetorical act in his theory of psychoanalysis

L'homme est né libre, et partout est il dans les fers

(Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains)

Rousseau, 1762/2006

Introduction

Forty years after its introduction into clinical psychoanalysis by Wilfrid Bion (1962), the concept of *reverie* has inspired an immense outpouring of articles and research on the psychotherapeutic relationship, especially its unconscious or otherwise hard-to-conceptualize layers (Ogden, 1997; Ferro, 2006; Lombardi, 2008; Civitarese, 2018; Busch, 2019). Applying the concept reverie into psychotherapies has become one of the current hot trends in psychotherapeutic discourse (Busch, 2019). Although somewhat surprising given the sparseness of Bion's uses of the concept in his writings, the idea of reverie seems to have been successful in capturing something felt by many to be difficult or even impossible to express otherwise. In addition, it offers a modern, fashionable and zeitgeisty way in which to define certain ideas. It especially suits psychotherapists, clinical psychologists and researchers who seek to present their views as an antidote to the modern (Busch, 2019) rationality-laden discourse on clinical psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy.¹

¹ Also, as a concept, reverie has found its way not only to psychoanalysis but also to neuro-cognitive views on psychotherapies in general (McVey, Nolan, Lees, 2020), education theory (Harper, 2017), musicology (Lochlainn, 2021) and psychotherapy research (Gee, Loewenthal & Cayne, 2013; Holmes, 2018) among others.

Even if the term has proven difficult to define generally, and especially in the context of psychotherapy, we suggest, at least as a starting point for our deliberations, the following eloquent description by Kevin Jones (28.2.2022):

“A quiet state of being in which images, bodily sensations, thoughts, words, sounds, or ideas wander in and out of awareness without any particular aim or intention. The capacity for reverie is an important aspect of subjective development, creativity, and the therapeutic process.”

However, as its popularity has spread, reverie has been severed from its conceptual roots, making it difficult to trace its original meaning. Furthermore, the reasons why Bion found necessary to introduce the concept of reverie into psychoanalytic discourse have been lost. If we follow in the steps of the so-called Cambridge School of conceptual history² (Skinner, 1969), we can ask what kind of a *rhetorical act* Bion was engaging in when he introduced the concept of reverie to the psychotherapeutic scene.

Thus, the aim in this article is to lay bare the conceptual and historical roots of the concept. This will contribute not only to a better understanding of the concept itself but also of its rhetorical aspects in the history of psychotherapy. We start our investigation in pre-modern times, thereafter moving on to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William James, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, and Gaston Bachelard. After this historical introduction, we will feel able to comment on Bion and his reasons for incorporating reverie, a novel concept in psychotherapies³, into his psychoanalytic theory. We

² The Cambridge School underlines the specific and detailed subjective, social, and historic context in which certain ideas or theories are born. It sets out to rebut views that simplify the role of context and claim that during a specific historical period concepts and their contexts are solely impregnated with the same simplified big dilemmas (Skinner, 1969).

³ It should be noted that Josef Breuer in his *Studies on hysteria* had already used the term reveries to describe Anna O's hypnoid mental states. However, the word subsequently disappeared from the psychoanalytic literature (Busch, 2019).

conclude by speculating on its *rhetorical function* at present and offering some ideas on the ways in which it might contribute to current psychotherapeutic and psychiatric discourse.

The literal Romanticization of reverie: Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Reverie was not originally a philosophical or psychological concept. Instead, it referred to certain unwanted experiences and to uncivilized or uncontrolled conduct. It was only later that it became a conceptual tool in critiques of epistemology and ideology. The word derives from middle French (a variant spoken from the 14th to 17th centuries) in which the word *rêverie* meant wild and delirious speech. The word also had a connotation in the context of religion, where it referred to free and unbounded exaltation specially in mystical experiences (CNRTL, 4.10.2022).

Thus, reverie originally described mental states that were outside of, or free from, the rational limits of the human intellect. That is, states of reverie were either incomprehensible and meaningless or they were mystical. Moreover, they were expressions that lacked any epistemic or political significance. Nevertheless, at the dawn of Romanticism the understanding of reverie changed, either coming to mean the same thing as daydreaming or into an ideological concept with critical and epistemic undertones. It ended up being used as in critiques of both the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the general conventions of social life. This semantic reform was the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

Rousseau (1782/1979) used the concept of reverie in a new way in his last, unfinished work *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of a solitary walker*). In the second walk, he describes the experience of reverie as follows:

“The night was advancing, I saw the sky, some stars, and a little verdure. This first sensation was delightful; and at that time I felt nothing further. It appeared that I was

just awakened into life, and had inspired me with the charm of my new existence every object that surrounded me. Fully occupied with the present moment, I remembered nothing that had passed, had no instinct idea of myself, nor the least notion of what had just happened. I neither knew who I was, nor where I came from; felt no pain, fear, or inquietude and saw my blood run as I would have seen a rivulet, without thinking in any manner that it belonged to me. I felt throughout my whole being the most ravishing calm, to which, on recollection, I can find nothing comparable among our most active and distinguished pleasures.”

(Rousseau, 1782/1979)

To understand Rousseau’s highly idiosyncratic account, both its form and content, we need to bear in mind Rousseau’s personal situation during its preparation over the years 1776-1778. By that time, almost all Rousseau’s social, political and scientific aspirations had come to a dead end. Moreover, he had lived through a traumatized childhood. His mother had died only nine days after his birth and when he was only ten years old his father had abandoned him in order to avoid fighting a duel. Nevertheless, ~~as an adult and~~ despite these difficult circumstances, he had enjoyed a productive and successful adult life that lasted until 1754, when he completed his treatise *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on Inequality*). Unfortunately, Rousseau’s radical, democratic views led to conflict with his former supporters Denis Diderot and Friedrich Melchior, Baron de Grimm. This was the beginning of Rousseau’s social decline, which rapidly accelerated few years later in 1762 on the publication of his two, perhaps most important and influential books, *Émile ou de l’éducation* (*Émile, or On Education*) and *Du contrat social* (*The Social Contract*).

Both books were heavily criticized by the church, the social and scientific establishment and, also by the Enlightenment-minded Voltaire. This criticism intensified and ended in brutal hatred of Rousseau and even his house and belongings. The situation led Rousseau to exile, anguish and

misery, accompanied by mistrust and disappointment in the part of his fellow human beings. It was as if he had been cursed (Cranston, 1982, 1991, 1997⁴; Wokler, 2012).

While not wanting to make oversimplified psychological interpretations about Rousseau's inner life or motivation, we feel that it is more than understandable that he turns inward and start looking for peace and truth from nature and from his innermost reality. As if underlining his fate in the treacherous human world, Rousseau commences *Reveries* with a moving passage:

“Behold me then, if I alone upon the earth, having neither brother, relative, friend or society, but my own thoughts; the most social and affectionate of men, proscribed, as it were, by unanimous consent. They have sought in the refinement of their hatred, what would be the most cruel torment to my susceptible soul, and have rent asunder every bond which attached me to them. I should have loved mankind in spite of themselves, and it was only by throwing off humanity that they could avoid my affection. At length, then, behold them strangers, unknown, as indifferent to me as they desired to be; but to them, what am I. This remains to be sought.”
Rousseau, 1782/1979.

Thus, while *Reveries* starts with an expression of immense disappointment in human brotherhood, at the same time, and more importantly, it gives a new meaning to reverie. It no longer refers to AS delirious talk, or religious exaltation. In Rousseau's mind, reverie has become a way to find the true core of life and his personal soul. Reverie has become a path to the innermost truth of one's being. Here we meet the Rousseau who has constantly criticized civilization for corrupting man's soul and, at the same time, the Rousseau who paves the way for Romanticism and other critical voices against the Enlightenment and its rationalism⁵. It is as if Rousseau genuinely felt that the human parts of

⁴ Maurice Cranston wrote a three-volume biography of Rousseau between the years 1982 and 1997.

⁵ Rousseau's relation to the Enlightenment was ambivalent. While on the one hand he started his intellectual journey occupied with ideas very much coined during the Enlightenment, on the other he ended up presenting himself as a critic of that same ideology. As Voltaire said: “Never has so much intelligence been employed to render us stupid” (Marshall, 1978). Isaiah Berlin offered perhaps the sternest critique of Rousseau in his Mary Flexner lectures in 1952. Berlin interpreted Rousseau as representing the dangerous positive brand of freedom that leads to tyranny and antidemocratic ideas (Berlin, 2002). In the same vein as Voltaire and Berlin, Pankaj Mishra (2016) observed a link between Rousseau's philosophy and antidemocratic trends in Europe and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Berlin's interpretation of Rousseau can, however, easily be criticized as biased and informed by the ideological situation immediately after the Second World War, when Adolf Hitler's regime was still historically recent and Joseph Stalin's tyranny at its zenith.

man's soul had been enslaved by rationality and scientific thought and that reverie could liberate man's soul from this slavery. As he states in *Discourse on sciences and art* (Rousseau, 1741/2014), moral decadence and loss of virtue has always accompanied the progress of sciences and culture. From Rousseau's standpoint Enlightenment is not an exception. We will see later that it is precisely this critical view of the Enlightenment that Bion finds important when he incorporates reverie into his psychoanalytic thinking.

To us, it seems that after Rousseau, the meaning of reverie softened and lost its critical edge. Clearly, Romanticism was a golden era for daydreaming⁶, but Romantic reverie never became the strong critical, epistemological, and ideological force that it was in Rousseau's *Reveries*. However, at the same time when reverie was considered as positive and valuable by many romantic novelists, in the medical context in the mid 19th century, it was often seen as a symptom of a psychiatric illness (Ford, 2010). Nevertheless, when the cultural climate changed around the beginning of the 20th century, reverie, now transformed, re-entered the stage in the innovative works of William James, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Gaston Bachelard and the literary modernists.

Conceptual similarities: Reverie, stream of consciousness, durée, and free association

William James was the first to coin the phrase "stream of consciousness". He presented his view in the *Principles of Psychology* (1890/1983) as follows:

"... consciousness is an uninterrupted flow: a river or a stream are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In taking it hereafter let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or of subjective life."

Although James was suggesting a solution to the theoretical problem of human consciousness, it soon became obvious that it was being extended to describe a crucial dimension in the evolution of

⁶ A good example of romantic reverie is Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe* (Poet's love) composed in 1840.

modern culture. Above all, it was used to describe perhaps the most central trait in modern literature, the stream of consciousness technique, made famous through such literary works as James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922/1986) and T.S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917/1991). The automatic writing⁷ of the surrealists also drew from the same source. They all exemplify Rousseau's and James's wish to focus attention on the stream of sensations and proto thoughts that flow freely from the sensations of the outside world to those of innermost reality. Whereas Rousseau's interest was in his own reveries, James's in the flowing nature of human consciousness in general, and modern novelists' in the stream of consciousness in their characters' inner lives, all emphasized reverie as a path to an individual's innermost truth.

Although Rousseau's view on reverie and the concept of the stream of consciousness seem similar, their philosophical context is profoundly different. Whereas Rousseau was offering a critique of the dominant epistemology and ideology and hence of civilization itself, James and the modernists alike sought simply to reveal how human consciousness functions. In so doing, they were initiating scientific research on consciousness, first in relation to psychoanalysis and subsequently to neuro-cognitive science.

Sigmund Freud was also interested in the reverie-like dimensions of human consciousness, at around the same time as James and the literary modernists. But his motivation and approach, especially in the beginning, were different. Unlike James, he was less interested in consciousness as

⁷ In the 1920s, some surrealist poets like André Breton and Paul Éluard tried writing in a hypnoid or trancelike mental state. They tried to follow their stream of consciousness as if they were following the basic practice in psychoanalysis of free association untrammelled by attempts to conceptually organize the deluge of material generated. They believed that reverie-like material that flows from the unconscious also had artistic value. Freud and his followers were not as interested in surrealism as surrealists were in psychoanalysis. This was in part due to Freud's conservative taste in art, favoring the great masters of traditional art. It was also in part due to a difference of perspective on dreamlike expression. Psychoanalysts were interested in interpreting such material whereas surrealists valued it as such. It might also be that Freud found the idea of automatic writing too naïve because it ignored the obstacles, i.e., resistance, which interrupt the automatic flow of writing. (Durzoi, 2001; Esman, 2011).

such and more interested in symptoms and healing. Although Freud's technique of free association resembles the concepts of reverie and stream of consciousness, his thinking took partly a different path, largely because his theories were developed in a medical setting aimed at "healing through understanding" of the patient's suffering, and also because he aimed to return reverie to the control of the human rational intellect.

The idea of free association was the result of a process that took place in 1892-1894 and became crystallized in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899/1900 and in Freud's early papers on technique⁸. It was a period during which Josef Breuer and Freud were working together to both understand and cure the mental state known as hysteria. The free associations technique replaced the techniques of suggestion, hypnosis, pressing, and questioning (Jones, 1953). Freud seemed to think that, at least to some extent and despite the natural resistance to the basic rule of associating freely, people are able to do so. Nevertheless, only few decades later Sandor Ferenczi (1919/1980) commented on this Freudian view, claiming that the ability to freely associate must be a result of the therapeutic process, not its starting point or precondition. Thus, psychoanalysis came to be a recapitulative process that enables the patient once again to freely associate. In this process, healing means the patient's ability to dwell in reverie. Both Rousseau and Freud, as critics of civilization, understood the healing potential of reverie and that it is endangered in modern civilized societies. However, Freud's thinking about the role and function of the basic rule was not consistent. On the

⁸ One of these early formulations is in the paper "On the beginning of treatment": "What you tell me must differ in one respect from an ordinary conversation. Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas that may occur to you ... but in this case you must proceed differently. You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the grounds of certain criticism and objections ... You must never give in to these criticisms ... indeed, you must say it precisely because you feel an aversion to doing it." (Freud, 1913).

one hand, he wanted to return reveries to the control of rationality, while on the other he supported the view that the ability to freely associate has recapitulative and healing potentials.

In addition to psychoanalysis, it seems that stratification of both the world and the human mind was a popular idea around the beginning of the 20th century. The notion that both in the world and in the human mind there is something that cannot be grasped by the rational intellect was very much in the air. In France, the leading exponent of this view was Henri Bergson, a bright star in the firmament of French philosophy.

Bergson essentially continued the critique of the Romantic artists and novelists who, along with others, such as the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, had rejected the hegemony of rationalism in modern science (Jones, 1975). Bergson aimed to re-establish a metaphysical view of ultimate reality which he saw as a flowing, holistic, and ever-changing in its nature. More specifically, he saw reality as dualistic, as comprehensible in two different ways by two different means. This quality of reality he termed *durée*. The human rational *intellect* does not have the capacity to comprehend ultimate reality of this kind. Instead, it is well equipped to relate to the world instrumentally by making distinctions and building structures. However, Bergson thought that the mind is able to comprehend the ultimate dimension of reality as *durée* through another faculty, that of *intuition*. As Bergson (1903/2007) puts it in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

“The normal work of intellect is far from being disinterested. We don’t aim generally at knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but in order to take sides, to draw profit – in short to satisfy an interest (...) To try to fit a concept to an object is simply to ask what we can do with the object, and what it can do for us. To label the object with a certain concept is to mark in precise terms the kind of action or attitude the object should suggest to us ...”

According to Bergson, unlike intellect, a philosophical attitude should be based on disinterested intuition, as it is the only human faculty that can receive ultimate reality. To us, it seems as if

Bergson is inviting us to engage Rousseau-like in reverie. The interesting aspect in Bergson's invitation is the idea of intuitive conceptual thinking. In contrast to both Rousseau and the Romantic poets, he attempts to stay with the thinking faculty of the human mind. Rather than abandon it, he wants to expand it. Although it remains unclear whether he succeeded, his aim was to elaborate a philosophical method based on intuition. As we shall see later, this attempt to be faithful to the human capacity to think is an essential characteristic of Bion's way of comprehending reverie.

Although, Bergson's thinking was devalued in philosophical circles after the Second World War⁹, this was partly due to his scientific reputation and partly to the post-war scientific atmosphere, which looked unfavorably on views that sounded obscure, mystical, and unscientific. As we have argued earlier, it was an era impregnated with a limitless belief in the rational superiority and capability of the human intellect to solve in the same manner all the problems that humankind would ever face (Sampolahti & Laitila, 2022). Despite this, Bergson's views have continued, in the shadows, to fertilize philosophy, especially the work of his fellow French philosopher Gaston Bachelard.

Gaston Bachelard: reverie as a critique of ideology

Gaston Bachelard's work as a philosopher is best understood in the context of Martin Heidegger's late philosophy. They had a similar epistemological standpoint, i.e., that the world opens itself to the human mind in two ways. Referring to Heidegger, if anachronistically, we would like to say that

⁹ Bergson was once again the focus of philosophical debate in 1966, when Gilles Deleuze wrote his treatise *Bergsonism* on Bergson. Since then, and especially in the 21st century, Bergson's philosophy has been understood both as having intrinsic value and as a driving force in contemporary philosophy. It has been claimed that Bergson's views entail dimensions that are relevant, for example, to research on post- and decolonialization (Diagne, 2011; Pitts & Westmoreland, 2019), the new materialism and feminism (Grosz, 2017), and the philosophy of cinema (Lazzarato, 2019).

this occurs in both a calculative and meditative way. Or as Bergson might have said, through both intellect and intuition.

As Heidegger himself has stated, starting in the 1930s, his philosophy went through a paradigmatic change (Heidegger, 1936/2002, 1947/1978). He started to lose trust in the idea that abstract and theoretical thinking is the best way of approximating the truth and, turning to art and poetry, introduced the idea of twofold thinking (Heidegger, 1957/1966). In a speech honoring the composer Konrad Kreutzer, he proposed two contrasting ways of thinking: calculating (*rechende*) and meditating (*besinnliches*).

Calculating thinking refers to everything that can become understood and controlled with the help of mathematics and technology. However, according to Heidegger, the world also has dimensions in that are not understandable through calculating thinking. Such dimensions are, so to speak, beyond its limits. This does not mean that those dimensions cannot be apprehended through thinking. They are attainable through another kind of thinking – meditative thinking (Heidegger, 1957/1966).

When Heidegger illustrates meditative thinking, he turns to the medieval mystic and theologian Meister Eckart, who introduced the word *Gelassenheit* into the German language. Originally, it meant turning away from the world in order to be open to an encounter and union with God. Heidegger, instead of accepting the concept as such, redefined it. For him, *Gelassenheit* refers to being open to the world, without intention or compulsion, waiting to see how the world both opens and conceals itself (Sampolahti & Laitila, 2020). A passage from the medieval mystical text *Theologia Germanica* movingly illustrates Heidegger's understanding of the two modes of thinking and their relationship with each other.

“But these two eyes of the soul of man cannot both perform their work at once; but if the soul shall see with the right eye into eternity, then the left eye must close itself and refrain from working and be as though it were dead.” *Theologica Germanica*

This is a beautiful exposition of reverie, which Rousseau echoes in the seventh chapter of *The*

Reveries of a Solitary Walker:

“I have sometimes studied profoundly, but seldom with pleasure, almost always against inclination, and as it were by force. Reveries recreate and amuse, but study fatigues and stresses me, thought being ever a painful and unentertaining occupation. Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more frequently my meditations convert to reveries and during these wanderings my soul fleets lightly over the universe on the wings of imagination, wrapped with ecstasies which surpass every other enjoyment.” Rousseau, 1782/1979.

Thus, Rousseau sees two alternative ways of positioning oneself in the world. One is profound study and the other is meditation and reverie. One is intentional and manipulative, the other is light and imaginative. Compared to Rousseau’s ideological and intense exposition, Heidegger’s tone is considerably more neutral. Rather interpreting calculative thinking per se as alienating, he sees it has having an important function in, for example, the natural sciences and technology. However, it is important to acknowledge its limits. He seems to value both thinking modes more clearly than Rousseau does, although for him, too, the most important things in life are those that can become thought about through meditative thinking (Heidegger, 1957/1966).

Bachelard, like Heidegger, also underlined the importance of, and searched for, an antithesis to rationality. He conceptualized the situation as a conflict between reason and imagination, just as Rousseau saw it as a conflict between nature and civilization, and Bergson as a conflict between intellect and intuition. For Bachelard (1971), the process through which imagination is to be put in control of reason is education:

“From the time a child reaches the age of reason, from the time he loses his absolute right to imagine the world, his mother like all educators, makes it her duty to teach him to be objective – objective in the simple way adults themselves believe themselves to be objective. He is stuffed with sociability.”

Although, identifying views from different eras and contexts with each other is inappropriate on the programmatic or ideational level, we tend to think, that Rousseau, Bergson and Bachelard have been drinking from the same well.

That there is a family resemblance between Bergson, Heidegger and Bachelard seems obvious to us: Bergson speaks of intuition, Heidegger of meditative thinking or *Gelassenheit*, and Bachelard of imagination or reverie. Nevertheless, it is difficult, for two reasons, to show this in a detailed and documented way: First, Bachelard wants to distance himself from the philosophy written before him. Second, his way of writing departs from traditional philosophical discourse. It is not argumentative or discursive but highly metaphorical and artistic. It is as if he is repeatedly trying to present his ideas through literary allusions without attempting to either construct arguments as such or criticize those of other philosophers. Bachelard's texts, aimed at challenging the dominant rational and calculative cultural ideology and underlining the importance of imagination and reverie as alternative ways of settling in the world, often read like ideological exclamations or an emotionally moving prose poem. Perhaps Bachelard's *style* is indeed the best cue to understanding his philosophy.

In this sense he is in the same company as not only Bergson but also Horkheimer and Adorno, who relentlessly critiqued the Enlightenment for excessive rationalism. Rather than surrendering to rationalistic language, Bachelard attempts to de-rationalize and de-mythologize it (Lee, 2021). As he writes in his last essay *Air and Dreams* (Bachelard, 1988),

As is only right, the poetic knowledge of the world precedes rational knowledge of objects. The world is beautiful before being true. The world is admired before being verified.

For our purposes, it suffices to note that Bachelard shared the same epistemological starting point as all the above-mentioned philosophers, and contributed to the same French, and presumably also

English, post-war philosophical discourse. In a sense he was able to heal the wound that the dismissal of Bergson had inflicted on the understanding of thinking as a dual activity. We tend to believe, although intuitively and without empirical evidence, that it is at least possible that Bion incorporated the concept of reverie into his psychoanalytic theory first and foremost with the help of Bachelard. Nevertheless, Bion's *general* philosophy and positioning are evidently more influenced, or perhaps dare we say, molded by Bergson's philosophical views.

Reverie as a symbol of Bion's psychoanalytic philosophy

As Fred Busch has pointed out, given how little Bion in fact said about *reverie*, the plethora of articles on Bion's concept of reverie is puzzling. In fact, Bion mentions the concept in only a few passages in his book *Learning from Experience* (Bion, 1962):

“... when the mother loves the infant what does she do with it? Leaving aside the physical channels of communication my impression is that her love is expressed by reverie.”

And few lines later he continues:

“Though the difficulties of penetrating the adult's mind in analysis are great they are less so than attempting to penetrate the infant's by speculative hypothesis; investigation of reverie in the adult may afford us an entry into this problem. We may deduce from reverie, as psychological source of supply of the infant's need for love and understanding, what kind of psychological receptor organ is required if the infant is to be able to profit from reverie as it is able, thanks to digestive capacities of the alimentary canal, to profit from the breast and the milk it supplies. Put in another way, assuming alpha-function as that which makes available to the infant what would otherwise remain unavailable for any purpose other than evacuation as beta-elements, what are the *factors* of this function that relate directly to mother's capacity for reverie?”

The mother's capacity for reverie is here considered as inseparable from the content for clearly one depends on the other. *If the feeding mother cannot allow reverie or if the reverie is allowed but is not associated with love for the child or its father this fact will be communicated to the infant even though incomprehensible for the infant.*”

Bion clearly states in the above extracts that reverie in the context of a baby and its mother has three dimensions. First, it is a medium for communication; second, it seems to be a way of establishing a

pre-conceptual relationship with the baby that is either invested with love or lacks love; and third, it is way of being together that brings healing experiences in its train. A few pages earlier, Bion explains how he conceptualizes these healing experiences. He defines alpha-function and applies it analogically to the *treatment relationship*. As is typical of Bion, he gives an abstract, ambiguous and elliptic definition:

“Alpha-function is a name given to an abstraction used by the analyst to describe a function of which *he does not know the nature, until such time he feels in position to replace it with factors for which he feels he has obtained evidence in the course of the investigation in which he is employing alpha-function.*”

In this article, we are interested in the second and third dimensions, as they give us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of reverie in the totality of Bion’s psychoanalytic thinking and relate it to the rich conceptual history of reverie. Our aim is not to address psychological development or specific dimensions in psychoanalytic treatments. However, before we can do this, we must familiarize ourselves with the general relationship between Bergson and Bion.

First, we refer to a study by Nuno Torres (2013) on Bion’s philosophical starting points. Torres had a rare opportunity to study what Bion had actually read along with his marginalia. Torres found that Bion had intensively read Henri Bergson and Norbert Whitehead. Because we are interested in reverie, we focus on Bergson. It is well known that Bion understood French and even attended the University of Poitiers for a year (1921–1922) to further his knowledge of the language (Busch, 2019; Torres, 2013). Thus, we can assume that he was familiar with French philosophical discourse and might, although there is no textual evidence for this, even have been acquainted with the philosophy of Bachelard.

If we consider Bion’s writings chronologically, it seems clear that he was already aligning his own thinking with Bergson’s in the 1940s. He had come up with the view that the world consists of

things that can be comprehended through calculating thinking and things that cannot. Like Bergson, Bion distinguishes between *intuition* and *intellect*. Both Bergson and Bion are very much aligned on the big question of contemporary philosophy: “How should we understand the relationship between analytic reason and intuitive revelation (Cohen, 1999)?” One of the most elegant expositions of this dilemma of modernity is that given by Edmund Husserl (1936/1970) in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*:

“The exclusiveness with which the total worldview of modern man, in the second half of the nineteenth century, let itself be determined by the positive sciences and be blinded by the “prosperity” they produced, meant an indifferent turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity. Merely fact-minded sciences produce fact-minded people”

A few years later, following in Husserl’s footsteps, Bion (1948) criticized the state of medical psychiatry in *Psychiatry at a Time of Crisis*:

“Reason attempts to achieve competent action and points out human hypertrophy of an operative intellect focused on external reality, tool building, machinery and technology.”

His solution was to broaden the scope of thinking, to which end he followed the view presented by Bergson. Both also wanted to include the dimension of reverie in the thinking capacity of the human mind and refused to see it in a mystical or nonreflective way.

It is hard to believe that Bion’s decided to introduce the word reverie into psychoanalytic discourse solely for the purpose of including dreaming or daydreaming. Instead, reverie is a concept employed to refer to what he – and Bergson – meant by intuition as opposed to intellect. Thus, it is a concept that carries a strong epistemological and ideological message, one that is in line with the critical voices of the 20th century philosophers who have tried to remind our intellectual culture of the limits of the human intellect.

If we assent to the view that reverie has critical epistemological and ideological connections, then we must adopt a critical stance towards other interpretations of the concept. As James Grotstein (2009) remarks, “Of all Bion’s new ideas, that of ‘reverie’ seems to be acquiring the most cachet as an instrument of technique”. The same is true of another concept, *negative capability*, that Bion (1970) used in a later attempt to point towards intuition and away from intellect¹⁰. For example, Diana Voller (2019) has tried to operationalize the concept as a technical instrument. From our historical perspective, attempts to redefine reverie as a technique do not respect Bion’s ideological reasons for introducing the concept in psychoanalysis. Originally, reverie refers to *intuition*, to landscapes beyond the limits of *intellect*. Hence, attempts to develop reverie as a psychotherapeutic technique are unfaithful to Bion’s theoretical aspirations and ignore the rich conceptual history of the concept. Naturally, reverie can be used as a technical concept but then it is being torn apart from its philosophical roots. If we put it polemically, reverie will become used but not understood.

Reverie and the contemporary situation in psychiatry and psychotherapies – a glance at the politics of psychotherapies and psychotherapy research

Psychotherapy is historically a modernist construction. As a treatment, it is an outcome of the human intellect. However, paradoxically, it is often conceptualized as a treatment that includes elements based on intuitivity that shun the structuring activity of the human intellectual faculty. From this point of view, the recent popularity of the concept of reverie becomes understandable. Its use makes it possible to refer to dimensions in psychotherapy processes that are otherwise in danger of becoming neglected in the current rationality-laden therapeutic discourse.

¹⁰ Keats (1817) coined the concept in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, when reflecting on the literary genius of Shakespeare: “(...) it struck me what capability went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously. I mean *negative capability*. That is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (Rollins, 1958)

It seems, that most often when psychotherapy is societally discussed, it is seen in the light of the intellect. Questions of effectiveness, economic efficiency, the availability of psychotherapies, and the prioritizing of different modes and schools of psychotherapy are all questions for the intellect. The same is often true in psychotherapy research. We would find it interesting to reflect upon psychotherapy and its policies from a viewpoint that takes seriously the archetypal question faced by contemporary culture and philosophy: How are we to understand the relationship between reason and intuitive revelation (Cohen, 1999)?

The views of Bergson and Bion lead us to sympathize with attempts to integrate bodily responses into psychotherapy research (Wiltshire, Philipsen et al., 2020; Nyman-Salonen, Vall, Laitila et al., 2020). In this research tradition, the aim is to connect different autonomous bodily responses to the discursive linguistic exchanges that characterize therapeutic negotiations. Such research programs seem to present a promising way to include *intuition* in therapeutic processes. It is as if they were constructing a conceptual and correlational bridge between intuitivity and empirical research. Likewise, it leads to appreciate the promising research on so called now and present moments in psychotherapy (Stern, 2004). At the same time, however, it also alerts to what is missing in the philosophical accounts and analyses of the nature of understanding that have evolved in these studies. We see a danger, “together with” Bergson and Bion, that such understanding centers exclusively on *intellect*, to the neglect of *intuition*. We also see the danger that if concepts are used too loosely (as is sometimes the case with reverie) we may also lose the connection to *intellect* and instead approach reality through *intuition* alone. Bergson and Bion both underline the view that creative thinking – and, we would add, creative psychotherapy combined with creative psychotherapy research – needs both.

We end our reflection on Bion, reverie, intuition, and intellect with a passage from Heidegger's (1957/1991) course of lectures titled *The Principle of Reason*. He concludes as follows:

“(…) does the above-mentioned determination that humans are the *animale rationale* exhaust the essence of humanity? Does the last word that can be said about being run thus: being means ground/reason. Or isn't human nature, isn't its affiliation to being, isn't the essence of being what remains, and even more disturbingly, worthy of thought? If this the way it is going to be, may we give up what is worthy of thought in favor of the recklessness of exclusively calculative thinking and its immense achievements? Or are we obliged to find paths upon which thinking is capable of responding to what is worthy of thought instead of, enchanted by calculative thinking, mindlessly passing over what is worthy of thought?

That is the question. It is the world-question of thinking. Answering this question decides what will become of the earth and human existence on this earth.”

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