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# Shadows holding their breath – Winnicott, Bion, and integration from the perspective of aesthetic experience

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## ABSTRACT

In the search for meaningful living, the theme of transformation and existence of differing self-states appears important in both Winnicott and Bion, well-exemplified by their theories of transitional phenomena and the caesura, respectively. For Winnicott, the possibility for differing self-states to coexist without strain emerges in the transitional area of experiencing. Bion emphasises the encounter with a gap between changing and contradictory self-states, acknowledging the tension that oppositions cause. This approach culminates in his account of the caesura. This article elucidates the differences in their approaches, highlights the value in both and explores the possibility to acknowledge both emotional realities – the strain-free coexistence of differing self-states and the preoccupation with the gap between them – in aesthetic experience, as one of its defining features is that of tolerating oppositions. I argue that aesthetic experience appears as an important source for engaging with diverging self-states. To address this, I look at an Emily Dickinson poem and concentrate on the relationship between the experiences of transience and continuity through the theoretical lens of Winnicott and Bion.

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## Introduction

Both Winnicott and Bion were preoccupied with the quest to render life meaningful, authentic and one's own. With respect to this, a theme of transition and the existence of differing self-states emerges in their thinking as a key issue in self-growth and well-being. They approach the issue from distinct angles and with differing focus of attention. A central difference from this article's perspective lies in how they approach the gap, or the divergence of self-states: while Winnicott pays attention to unproblematised, strain-free coexistence of self-states, Bion concentrates on the gap, and the possibilities for transformation even when the gap is perceived as insurmountable. I will explore this by looking at Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena and Bion's theory of the caesura.

I have found both contributions incredibly rich and thought-provoking, and looking at them side by side offers an intriguing view not only of two closely related strands in psychoanalysis but also of two aspects of an existential concern of integrating experience and finding continuity in selfhood. This article explores the

difference in Winnicott and Bion and considers the value of both approaches in aesthetic experience.

In his theory of transitional phenomena, Winnicott finds a 'resting-place' (1971, p. 3) in acknowledging differing aspects of living. Here, contradictions become irrelevant. This is well-exemplified by his account of imaginary play, where experiences of the outer environment and inner reality intertwine in a continuous whole, play being both imaginary and real. Bion, for his part, concentrates on gaps (or caesurae, as he calls them) between self-states and the difficult task of transcending them as one is confronted with the emotional turmoil that encountering oppositions causes. The caesura remains an 'obstacle' that must be 'penetrated' (1977, p. 45). While Winnicott emphasises the 'peaceful coexistence' (Bitan, 2012, p. 48) between self-states, Bion seems to be acutely aware of the difference, or the gap between them.

Both thinkers ultimately refer to the developmental step where self-reflection and acknowledgement of the other as psychologically differentiated emerges, thus addressing the continuity between a less delineated and more firmly demarcated self-experience.<sup>1</sup> For Winnicott, this is the continuum between undifferen-

tiated and differentiated self-states, and for Bion, the developing capacity to form symbols from unrepresented, sensuous experience. While they both oppose a dualist approach, I argue that they highlight distinct attitudes in encountering the issue of differing self-states. In Winnicott, a link to undifferentiation is preserved while differentiation is acknowledged – differences are not erased but become irrelevant and unproblematised. In Bion, an experience of a gap, or difference, becomes a core concern as there is an attempt to tolerate the emotional tension involved. What transitional phenomena and the caesura represent is the delicate balancing between self-states or emotional realities that diverge in differing directions – something, as could be argued, that forms a central existential question for humans throughout life.

Aesthetic experience offers an interesting perspective on the theme of differing self-states. As I will elaborate later, one of its core features often noted in literature is tolerating oppositions. I approach aesthetic experience as an integrative process, binding bodily, non-verbalisable experience with conscious thought and forming an evolving dialogue with distinct aspects of being. Aesthetic experience, from this perspective, intimately connects with one's sense of self and meaningful existence. I highlight its integrative capacity and the possibility to attend to both the Winnicottian and Bionian approaches in aesthetic experience by exploring the poem 'There's a certain Slant of light'<sup>2</sup> (1955) by Emily Dickinson. The poem's theme is death. I look at it from the viewpoint of the acknowledgement of transience – the notion of the totality of death and the impossibility of thoroughly understanding it. In this connection, the continuum from less delineated to more firmly delineated self-experience is associated with experiences of continuity and transience as the emergence of a demarcated selfhood brings about a possibility to address the finality of existence. In development, the experiences of being separate and being transient evolve interweavingly. I argue that experience of reading the poem can include perspectives on integration that are here approached through Bion's and Winnicott's theories: both the acknowledgement of a gap between self-states and the peaceful coexistence between them.

The poem gives a form for death, materialised in an image of winter afternoon light. The light, slanted because it comes from a low angle in the afternoon, colours everything with its tone. It is an oppressive force that comes across as terrifying, causing anguish and pain. The whole of the world listens still, and everything freezes under death's touch. But even as the sun moves on and the light changes, the dread it has caused

stays, lingering on. The poem offers a possibility of encountering a gap that one is unable to cross with the ineffability and terror involved – a theme explored by Bion. However, the realm of aesthetic experience belongs to the transitional area, finding creative forms for the gap and so preserving the link to undifferentiated experience – or acknowledging the finality of a gap and retaining a tie to the feeling of continuity. Dickinson's poem is an exploration of these realities, addressing our incapacity to overcome the totality of death and yet finding the capacity to do so (in the emotional realm) by encountering the reality of transience creatively. As an unending flux of alternating perspectives, one does not find an ultimate answer, but is left with the task of appreciating a paradox that will necessarily remain open right until the end of the life cycle.

In the following, I look at Winnicott's transitional phenomena and Bion's caesura, mainly concentrating on their seminal texts on the topics, namely, on 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' in *Playing and Reality* (1971) by Winnicott and 'Caesura' (1977) by Bion, concentrating on their takes on psyche in transit and attending to differing self-states. Subsequently, I offer a reflection on the differences between their approaches. I end with an exploration of Dickinson's poem.

### Transitional phenomena

The idea of a paradox and the task of tolerating it is a continuing theme in Winnicott's writings. A key text considering the issue is 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', the earliest version of which was given in a public speech in 1951 and first published in 1953. I will refer to the final version (1971). Here, Winnicott explores the child's emerging capacity to differentiate between self and other during the first year of life. From this transition, from undifferentiation to differentiation, a possibility to form a novel self-experience arises: a third area of experience, an intermediate space where it is possible to appreciate differing aspects of being – especially that of the environment being experienced as both outside one's psychological boundaries and as part of one's being – without considerable strain or tension. It develops from the relationship with primary caregivers as the infant gradually acknowledges psychological separateness. The intermediate area is a space that accepts differing realities, maintaining a tie to the child's personal world of primary creativity while appreciating the environment as something outside one's control: a source of curiosity, something to be explored. That is, Winnicott pays attention to paradox rather than conflict in his

understanding of human experience, as Goldman (2012) observes: 'For Winnicott, the contrast is not between pleasure and reality so much as it is *between two different kinds of relationship with reality* as it becomes increasingly external' (Goldman, 2012, p. 29, emphasis in the original). Transitional space retains a link to both undifferentiated and differentiated modes of being. It is a significant turning point in development and, for Winnicott, a precondition to imaginary play and a basis for mature forms of creativity and culture.

In the paper on transitionality, Winnicott is clear that this is a state that, to an outside observer, may seem paradoxical, as both inner and outer reality apply. He repeats several times that the paradox must not be challenged.<sup>3</sup> When healthy, the child immersed in imaginary play knows that the play involves imagination and doesn't take place merely in 'objective' reality. At the same time, it is crucial that the play feels as though it is also happening in the environment, that is, outside one's personal area of imagination. It is initially the caretaking adult who fosters the child's play area and the paradox it contains, intuitively aware of the need for it. Winnicott (1971) describes the infant's effort 'to weave other-than-me objects into the personal pattern' (p. 4) – a wonderful expression highlighting the intertwined nature of inner and outer reality. To challenge the paradox, or the fact that 'the environment is part of the infant and at the same time it isn't' (Winnicott, 1989a, p. 580), whether by the parent or later by the individual themselves, refers to a disillusioned world, a traumatic gap between self and other.

Winnicott held great value in relaxation and unintegrated states (see Taipale, 2023), based on trust built in early nurturing relationships and experienced as states of being or existing.<sup>4</sup> The unintegrated state of existing is a prerequisite for creativity and a sense of being a self. At the same time, there is tranquillity in how Winnicott describes the intermediate area in his paper on transitional phenomena. It is a 'resting-place' (1971, p. 3), a 'neutral area of experience' (17), 'unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality' (19), sheltering a sense of continuity. Winnicott's third case example in his paper is a fine example of him appreciating the paradox, both as a clinician with the patient and as an author writing about the case (see Bitan (2012) and Ogden (2021) for great readings of this case). The title of the case, 'Aspects of fantas', already demonstrates this, as one is left pondering the meaning and emotional tone of the neologism 'fantas' (see Ogden (2021, p. 842)). Winnicott gives an account of a particular session with a patient who has had to tolerate a great

deal of separation in her childhood. Winnicott's way of writing about the session is extremely tolerant of the equivocality of the meanings the patient's experience of being evacuated as a child during the Second World War carries, both in her fantasy world, her life history and the therapeutic interaction and relationship. While a short quote does not capture this attitude as well as reading the whole text does, perhaps some of it is present in a passage where the patient recalls her childhood fantasies or 'her imagination and what she believed to be real' (31):

'As she spoke I felt how easily these ideas could be labelled hallucinatory except in the context of her age at the time and her exceptional experiences in regard to repeated loss of otherwise good parents. She exclaimed: "I suppose I want something that never goes away." We formulated this by saying that the real thing is the thing that is not there' (31).

The conversation, which flowingly covers 'the whole field between subjectivity and objectivity' (33), proceeds in a dreamlike, gentle manner and gives a feel of a shared reality infused with an intense sense of the patient's imagination, which Winnicott seems to willingly accept as it is. The case, in its essence of tolerance, well demonstrates another important theme in Winnicott: playfulness. As Bitan (2012) explores, play avoids viewing oppositions as complementary or contradictory, but instead views them as peacefully coexisting – thus avoiding the perspective of a dualist logic, which leads to problematising the paradox. Unintegration, creativity and play intertwine into a whole, a benevolent stance that finds its footing from affectionate caretaking experiences and the child's own initiative, or, in Goldman's (2012) words, 'baby's healthy competence to make use of his own inventiveness' (17), coupled with the environment's (hopefully) welcoming attitude to that competence.

As Ogden (2021) explains, the intermediate area continues as a lifelong source of a feeling of being alive in a psychological sense. It is a shelter from feelings of deadness, emptiness, depletion and intolerable absence, not leaning on 'cause and effect, chronological and binary thinking' (Ogden, 2021, p. 839). Trying to resolve the paradox is to withdraw into overly logical, dualist thinking, being preoccupied with the impossibility of the paradox. While Winnicott acknowledges that sometimes, an experience of a gap is unavoidable, he also emphasises that the split is not necessarily the starting point. Bitan (2012) asserts that, for Winnicott, 'the problem is not how the inner and outer realities are linked, but rather why, in the first place, they are thought and appreciated only in terms of exclusion. Experience is

deprived of its value by such a split' (36–37). In contrast, Bion's emphasis seems to be on the situation where the split has taken place: how is one to find meaning and aliveness in a situation where realities have become so distant from one another that tension may become violent, even intolerable? How to travel from one state of mind to another, or 'surpass the various obstacles in the course of a psychological or spiritual journey of development' (Bion, 1977, p. 53). This tension is a central essence in his take on the caesura.

### Transcending the caesura

Bion's work very much deals with contradictions, the problem of tolerating uncertainties and ambiguities, and the capacity to acknowledge opposing realities and entertain several trajectories of thinking that are in opposition to one another. This trend in his thinking reaches its peak in the caesura, which refers to a gap between self-states or between self and other. For Bion, the challenging task is to transcend those gaps – to address differing parts of the self or create a connection with the other.

Bion took Freud's notion of the caesura between prenatal and postnatal life<sup>5</sup> and elaborated it in his own way, attending to gaps that divide us within ourselves or in between self and other. Bion writes of the caesura in several works written during the latter part of his life,<sup>6</sup> of which the most important is 'Caesura' (1977), based on a talk in 1975 and originally published in 1977, which Civitarese (2008) refers to as Bion's spiritual testament. A central matter in the text is to acknowledge a gap.<sup>7</sup> A challenge in life for Bion is to comprehend the difference between aspects of experience and to find a way to surpass the gap and travel from one self-state to another, or in Bion's words, to transcend the caesura. As Bergstein (2013) expresses, the caesura appears between existential realms, ultimately 'between one state of mind and another, between one person and another . . . and between Self and Self (conscious/unconscious, psyche/soma)' (622).

Bion uses birth as a model for the caesura. Ultimately, the initial caesura of one's existence seems to lie in the emergence of a psychological self founded on the body.<sup>8</sup> Bion discusses the need to connect to something that is 'unconscious and which may even be pre-natal, or pre-birth of a psyche or a mental life, but is part of a physical life . . .' (1977, p. 54). He describes the caesura beautifully: '[E]very one of us needs to be aware of this thing which is the *origin* of the sensation that there is something around' (1980, p. 294, emphasis in the original). He refers to the core of this something as being given names such as soul, spirit, and ego. From

my perspective, the 'origin of the sensation' lies in the gradual emergence of psychological boundaries, of being able to reflect on the self as distinct from the other. It is the area between 'protomenta' sensuous experience and the formation of rhythms, integrations and thoughts, or a caesura between prior and after the capacity for self-reflection and the emergence of experienced boundaries of the self.

The paper 'Caesura' is condensed and complex. It strikes me as quiet and meditative – at times lyrical, at times invested with dry humour. Bion offers several quotes – ten in total – in the beginning, titled 'Sources', ranging from Freud to Buber to Vivian Charles Walsh, a scholar in economy and philosophy, to St John of the Cross. The quotes centre on transitions from one reality to another: from union with God or mother to separate existence and back, from symbolism back to the body, from one mind state to another. Bion starts the text by taking the nature of truth and the decisions of which lines of thoughts one should follow: which is closest to an emotional truth, based on one's interaction with primitive levels of the mind and integrated with conceptual thought? He arrives at a question:

'How is one to penetrate this obstacle, this caesura of birth? Can any method of communication be sufficiently "penetrating" to pass that caesura in the direction from postnatal conscious thought back to the premental in which thoughts and ideas have their counterpart in "times" or "levels" of mind where they are not thoughts or ideas?' (45)

The above quote exemplifies well the impression of reading the text, namely, of confronting a sense of impossibility in encountering differences. The caesura is a 'barrier' (45), an 'obstacle' (45) that must be penetrated and surpassed. How do we appreciate several realities that apply and find a continuity by bridging a gap? How do we endure moving to uncertain areas that are clearly not located 'anywhere'? Bergstein (2013) emphasises how the challenge is not to arrive somewhere but to endure an unstable and unclear state of being in between: 'The caesura is therefore a model for the gap, that raging river between two banks [. . .] This is the almost impossible place Bion asks us to be in – the emotional turbulence – without gripping onto any of the banks in a way that halts movement' (625). Civitarese (2016, p. 89) emphasises the caesura as highlighting the dialectical nature between unconscious and conscious processes rather than standing for a rigid dividing line. As Bion (1980, p. 354) describes the connection with one's rudimentary experience, 'There is a contact through this permeable membrane in both

directions; the caesura is a transparent mirror'. It is a gap with continuity, both dividing and connecting (Bergstein, 2013) – in poetry, a caesura refers to a pause in a verse. The ongoing dialectical tension creates both links and barriers: abstract thought emerges from our bodily foundation, but at the same time, adds to the 'contact barrier' between unconscious and conscious functioning or to the fact that there are levels of experience that we cannot reach consciously (see Civitarese, 2020).

For Bion, it is necessary not to grip onto the riverbank for change to take place. Enduring the river refers to the paradox behind transcending the caesura: when one is between states, one is nowhere, and still, one has to 'be' there. When transcending the caesura, one is confronted with the need to be emotionally connected with self-states that negate each other. To endure the raging river is to see both of the riverbanks and appreciate them as being real, with the sense of fragmentation and impossibility that ensues. This sense of fragmentation necessarily refers to limits, to boundaries within one's psyche, the insurmountable gap between self and other, and to the self as delineated, thus transient.

There is a certain melancholy in the ending lines of 'Caesura': 'At this point, I cannot proceed for lack of the very elements which have not yet been discovered or elaborated. It is typical of decision which has to serve the human at those junctures when knowledge is not there to be used' (56). It is a plain and honest conclusion, an acknowledgement of one's limitedness, another caesura among all those gaps that remind us of our incompleteness, all those threads that will inevitably be left untied.

### The tragic and benign in Winnicott and Bion

Caldwell (2022) explores Winnicott's gradual shift in tone during his career: 'An increased attention to the baby's wish to reach out for life and experience replaces the reduced attention to anxiety in proposing that human subjectivity and experience do not originate primarily in deficit and reparation. The baby may reach out because of an absence or lack, but Winnicott increasingly assigns priority to curiosity, desire and the life that activity can embody, physically and psychically' (46). Winnicott, thus, moves from attending to loss to emphasising curiosity.

Following Caldwell's notion of Winnicott's change in tone, we may adopt a 'tragic' or a 'benign' view of the transition of emerging as a self in the world. As noted, we must view this not only as a developmental step but also as a continuous concern in one's existence, as the feeling of being alive as a self in its bodily and relational

nest is an ongoing issue in living. In Winnicott, a tragic approach emphasises the strain between inner and outer, and transitionality protects us from this potentially distressing gap. A benign approach considers transitionality as an investment of the individual in retaining a tie to their creative potential and bodily foundation while also attending to the environment as differentiated. In this approach, one can sense the joy and satisfaction of being alive, coupled with a feeling of safety. A playing child may very well communicate their knowledge of a stuffed animal being just a toy and, in the same breath, express concern for the animal's needs. The irrelevance of the paradox between differing emotional truths is another emotional truth: the peaceful coexistence between self-states is a self-state on its own.

In Bion, the tragic attitude dominates. This is not to say that it necessarily refers to pathology. Bion himself refers to the caesurae as either pathological or non-pathological (1977, p. 53). One's psychological path will necessarily include the experience of differences and gaps, and, ultimately, of otherness that presents itself as inconceivable. There is a continuum from the experience of differences to absence, emptiness, reaching out to a void and a sense of an emphasised border between things. When transcending the caesura, one retains an emotional tie to differing realities – a view of both the riverbanks – so as not to arrive at overly logical thinking where meaningfulness withers. The notion of 'being' both of the differing realities has a negative to it – the possibility that one is *neither*, that the space in between is a 'negative' space, an existential void. When confronted with a caesura, it is not only the fear of going mad that threatens, as Bion notes in 'Caesura' (1977, p. 53), but also, concluding, the fear of ceasing to exist.<sup>9</sup> In a fortunate case, there is a possibility to appreciate the dialectical tension between differences while retaining a sense of inner safety that shelters one from falling into the prevailing disillusionment or dread.

For Winnicott, transitionality underlines the possibility to arrive at a recognition of separateness without a painful sense of an uncrossable gap. Bion's approach, however, reminds us of our gaps: a terror of disintegration at worst and the appreciation of differences and dialectics at a more benevolent pole. Next, I will look at aesthetic experience and its quality of integration and of tolerating oppositions. I will briefly describe my perspective on aesthetic experience and then explore a poem by Emily Dickinson to show how aesthetic experience can be a means to engage both with an emphasised acknowledgement of a gap between self-states and an irrelevance of the gap, or a strain-free coexistence of diverging self-states.

## Aesthetic experience as integration

Wider than just a reaction to art or nature, aesthetic experience, as understood here, is a way of making sense of the world.<sup>10</sup> Berleant calls this ‘aesthetic sensibility’ (Berleant, 2015), or the overall sensuously charged attitude towards the world, emphasising the centrality and pervasiveness of aesthetic perception ‘in all regions of experience’ (Berleant, 2012, p. vii). In his influential ‘Art as Experience’ (1934), Dewey approached aesthetic experience as thoroughly embedded in living and everyday life, not confined to the realm of art but as an intrinsic part of experiencing life as meaningful and enriching. While not delving very deep into the conceptualisation of aesthetic experience, an essential theme from the point of view of this article is its capacity to tolerate oppositions.<sup>11</sup> Literature often notes that central to aesthetic experience is its integrative nature. Dewey saw aesthetic experience as a counterforce to a dualist attitude to life, bringing thought, emotion and action together in a continuously evolving stream of living. Emphasising the importance of play, Schiller (1795) proposed a ‘play drive’ that works in aesthetic experience to bring together contradictions or sensuous and formal (referring to abstract thought) aspects of life. To find harmony between them was the point where beauty emerges. In a psychoanalytic frame, Handler Spitz (1985) observes the capacity of aesthetic experience to dissolve ‘boundaries between self and other, and also categories into which we divide the world’ (142).

As I see it, at least two reasons exist for the integrative capacity of aesthetic experience. Firstly, it emphasises sensation, perception, and emotion. The sensuous quality – the feel – of the experience becomes a core concern, forming a strong bond with levels of experience that are hard or impossible to verbalise or represent. Representing something that is so intimately connected with unrepresentable, sensuous experience makes links between explicit and implicit levels of being (for Schiller, the sensuous and formal levels). Secondly, aesthetic experience is very much a relational event. As Handler Spitz observes, a typical characteristic of aesthetic experience is the feeling of a strong link with the aesthetic object, even to the point where the boundaries between self and object seem to fade. Both the accentuation of self-experience and the indistinctness of boundaries are present. Parsons (2000) puts this in a Winnicottian fashion: ‘Are we responding, then, to what the painting presents to us or what we bring to it from our imaginations? But the image binds the two inextricably together. To force them apart, by asking that question, would destroy our experience of the painting’ (170).

In its integrative capacity, aesthetic experience forms an essential dimension of living a meaningful life. It provides an intriguing perspective on the Winnicottian and Bionian approaches explored in this text. Next, I will observe this through a poem by Emily Dickinson, aiming to demonstrate how aesthetic experience can be a means to engage with multiple aspects of experience.

## Internal differences

The poem ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ (1890) by Emily Dickinson was written around 1861 and first published posthumously in 1890, as was most of her work. I will explore the poem and its relationship to death here with the intention of showing how both the Winnicottian and Bionian approaches to diverging self-states can be engaged with in aesthetic experience.<sup>12</sup>

There’s a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons –  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference,  
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –  
’Tis the Seal Despair –  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –  
Shadows – hold their breath –  
When it goes, ’tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death –

(Dickinson, 1890, p. 185).

The poem centres on an image of a winter afternoon light as the sun is already low, its slanted rays still illuminating the earth.<sup>13</sup> The light carries an acknowledgement of death. It is an oppressive force, and a carrier of despair. Its painful closeness makes the world halt. But even when the light changes as the sun moves on and one is released from its grip, it offers no relief. Instead, the slanted light is ‘prophetic of its own disappearance’ (Vendler, 2010, p. 128) as the afternoon turns to night and light vanishes along with the shadows that hold their breath.

The poem is explored in an essay by Ogden (2022), where he offers insightful reflections on it and a detailed exploration of the poem’s language. My emphasis is in how reading the poem offers a possibility to engage with



diverging emotional realities, exemplified in this article through the thinking of Winnicott and Bion.

My experience of reading the poem is that of being exposed, vulnerable and sad in a disconcerted way. The oppressive, inescapable acknowledgement of death, materialised in the winter afternoon light, is the centre of the poem. The light engulfs the whole of the earth. It is an immaterial presence that nonetheless changes everything within its reach. Its presence makes the world halt as even shadows hold their breath. The winter afternoon light is a light in transition, in an ambiguous area between day and night, but it is also a violent intrusion or a distorted image, a reminder of night in daytime. As the light changes and afternoon turns to evening, one is not relieved to be released from its grasp but can still sense the presence of the dread, in 'Distance/On the look of Death –', where, as Vendler (2010, p. 128) puts it, there is no answering gaze to be found.

The internal difference that the presence of the winter afternoon light carves inside one's mind is where meanings can be found. From this article's perspective, it is a gap that divides self-states and asks one to find sense in the inconceivability of differences: to transcend the caesura or to create an intermediate area of experience where personal meaningfulness emerges. The challenge presented in the poem is the impossibility of creating meaning where the boundary of death emerges – the ultimate non-experience, an exclusion of selfhood that rejects one's attempt to create meaningful self-experience of something that is totally other. And yet, one does so: the experience of reading the poem offers a possibility for a space that creatively acknowledges this impossibility. The winter afternoon light is an image of death, but also of separateness, of the creation of personal boundaries. Still, the experience of that image is a creative and aesthetic achievement, and as such, it is a carrier of transitionality, including the connection to the continuity of being while being the embodiment of impermanence.

The last stanza, like the other stanzas, ends in an em-dash, a caesura. Indeed, the numerous em-dashes are interruptions, keeping the poem from flowing freely. At the same time, the disconnected form refers directly to the content, to death as an ultimate gap. The poem both fills its narrative purpose and ends abruptly – just as life ends in the middle of living. Ogden notes how we rather cling on to despair than nothingness: as the winter afternoon light changes, one loses even despair and is exposed to the 'sheer, impersonal inevitability of death' (162).<sup>14</sup> To put it another way, there is a transition from an aesthetically formed image (the winter afternoon light) that is connected to one's personal creative source to a loss of that image (as the sun moves on) and the

absence and void that is revealed beneath. What I think is wonderful is that this transition happens *inside* a poem, offered to be experienced in a Winnicottian intermediate area. Thus, the poem contains the possibility to form a personally meaningful experience of the acknowledgement of death, paradoxically referring to one's sense of continuity in its link to personal, primary creativity. However, as the poem develops, an encounter with the experience of losing that meaningfulness emerges (as the winter afternoon light fades away), but again, within the confines of the poem, inside the play area. The interplay between transience and continuity is an unending stream of interwoven associations and existential truths.

To preserve a sense of the continuity of one's being in the middle of acknowledging its discontinuity refers to the preservation of safety, of being sheltered from unthinkable anxieties and unregulated states that shatter a sense of selfhood. Life becomes a barren, desolate path if one loses contact with the experience of love being eternal. At the same time, we are painfully aware that this is not so, but quite the opposite, as we face the inherent separateness and impermanence of our existence. Both are 'true' or real in terms of one's experience, and Dickinson's poem seems to hover between acknowledging and problematising this.<sup>15</sup> Integrating these realities is a lifelong process, right until the moment we stop existing. Dickinson's poem offers a possibility to engage in that process.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have looked at a central preoccupation for both Winnicott and Bion; namely, the possibility of engaging with different aspects of experience, and the challenges of transition from one self-state to another. Essentially, this refers to the tension in the continuum from less delineated self-experience to more firm boundaries of selfhood. I argue that Winnicott and Bion address the issue from differing angles. Winnicott emphasises a relaxed coexistence of self-states, resulting in the irrelevance of the contradiction involved. There is a sense of joy and a certain fertility in Winnicott's approach, without which life would lose much of its meaningfulness. For Bion, a tension between self-states remains. Bion's approach reminds us of our gaps: a terror of disintegration at worst and the appreciation of differences and dialectics at a more benevolent pole.

Aesthetic experience, in its integrative quality, offers a valuable lens for investigating the Winnicottian and Bionian approaches. Having

explored a poem by Emily Dickinson, I argue that aesthetic experience offers a possibility to engage with both the Bionian and the Winnicottian aspects of the experiences of transience and continuity: both an acknowledgement of a gap with the sense of tension involved and the irrelevance of the gap, and the strain-free coexistence of differing self-states. The poem addresses the inevitability and inconceivability of death: the ultimate gap. However, as a creative act, experience of the poem takes place inside a transitional play area. Creating aesthetic forms for the ineffability of death thus connects to the sense of continuity in the area of primary creativity. These aspects of experience remain open for interpretations and renditions throughout life.

## Notes

1. Related to this, as Orange (2011) notes, differing levels of experience are often explored through dualities such as body and mind, unconscious and conscious, emotion and cognition, and so on. Orange uses the terms implicit and explicit and considers them as ‘poles on a complex continuum of experience or as aspects of complex experiential systems’ (187) rather than dualities.
2. Dickinson didn’t name her poems; the titles used are the poems’ initial lines.
3. Accepting the paradox was the most important part of ‘Transitional objects and transitional phenomena’ for Winnicott (see Winnicott, 1989b, p. 204).
4. Something that, as Hopkins (1984) interestingly observes, equals to ‘a pre-reflective state of being’ (90) called ‘non-doing’ (*Wu Wei*) in the Taoist tradition and ‘non-thinking’ (*hishiryō*) in Zen Buddhism.
5. ‘There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth allows us to believe’ (Freud, 1926, p. 138).
6. Namely, in ‘Emotional Turbulence’ (Bion, 1976a), ‘On a Quotation from Freud’ (Bion, 1976b), ‘Evidence’ (Bion, 1976c) and ‘Caesura’ (1977), plus several mentions especially in ‘Bion in New York and São Paulo’ (1980), ‘The Italian Seminars’ (Bion, 2005), and ‘A Memoir of the Future’ (1991).
7. Bion discusses the caesura from the perspective of the clinical situation as well as in living in general. I will concentrate on the latter.
8. He seems to waver on whether his understanding of the initial caesura, or the development of self-experience, refers to the actual birth event or a postnatal developmental stage (for example, see Bion, 1978, p. 85). In any case, he uses the caesura as a metaphor for later transitions from one state of mind to another (Bion, 1977, p. 48).
9. Bion approaches this theme from many angles. For example, in ‘Attention and Interpretation’ (Bion, 1970, p. 230), he explores a state where mental space seems so immense that it cannot be represented at all, calling it psychotic fear or psychotic panic – such a violent state, an ‘explosion’, that it can lead to its counterimage, total silence.
10. Art, as a field dedicated to making sense of the world through creativity and aesthetic experience, naturally offers valuable insights. It can highlight and bring out central existential themes of living, and it is easy to see why psychoanalysis has such a close relationship with art.
11. For psychoanalytic accounts on aesthetic experience, see, for example, Bollas (1978, 1979); Civitarese (2018); Glover (2008); Hagman (2005); Handler Spitz (1985); Kohon (2016); Meltzer and Williams (1988); Parsons (2000); Rose (1992).
12. Aesthetic experience, as understood here, is essentially a subjective phenomenon, even if in interaction with the aesthetic object.
13. This is not her only poem with a central reference to light: ‘A metaphoric pattern of light and dark assumes obsessive proportions in this poet’s work,’ remarks Barker (1991, p. 2).
14. Interestingly, as Vendler (2010, p. 126) notes, despair was known in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as one of the two sins that would prevent salvation (the other being presumption). This is understandable if we view despair as a total loss of hope, referring to an insurmountable gap and thus to the idea of death as an ultimate end of existence that even religion will not be able to undo.
15. Noble (2013) explores Dickinson’s ambivalence in relation to dualism and the nature of truth, noting how ‘[h]er ingrained Puritan dualism clashes with her phenomenological meditations’ (pp. 202–203).

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