THE DISEASE IMAGERY AND THE HEALING NARRATIVES: BETWEEN LITERATURE AND PATHOGRAPHY. MAX BLECHER'S CASE[1]

Abstract: *The Romanian author Max Blecher suffered from spinal tuberculosis (Pott's disease). His works* Corpul transparent *(Transparent Body, 1934),* Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată *(Adventures in Immediate Unreality, 1936),* Inimi cicatrizate *(Scarred Hearts, 1937), and* Vizuina luminată: Jurnal de sanatoriu *(The Lit Up Burrow: A Sanatorium Journal, 1971), along with a series of articles, essays, short fictions and letters, form a homogenous and rich imagery in which illness acts as the canvas for the dismantlement of the puzzle of life and the fragmentation of speech. The illness experience represents for Max Blecher an identity revealer and in the same time a modulator for the narrative voice: faced with a tragic diagnosis the author refuses to be just a passive instance as a patient and he also assumes an active role as a "film director" of his own life in his writings where he can go beyond recording his experiences by processing them through the filter of unreality.*

Key words: *illness; narrative; Max Blecher; biography; imagery*

Max Blecher's medical condition. A short life spent in sanatoriums. Spinal tuberculosis or Pott's disease: definition, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment

Max Blecher's short life abruptly ended at the age of 29 (b. 8 September 1909 - d. 31 May 1938) revolved around disease: after being diagnosed at only 19 years old, as soon as he finished his studies, with an incurable disease at that time, spinal tuberculosis or Pott's disease, he was hospitalized for the next 10 years in sanatoriums across Europe: in France (Berck-sur-Mer), in Switzerland (Leysin) and in Romania (Braşov and Techirghiol).

Max Blecher's disease, spinal tuberculosis, is a condition "caused by infection of the spinal or vertebral column, by the tuberculosis bacillus, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Pott's disease is characterized by softening and collapse of the vertebrae, often resulting in a hunchback curvature of the spine"[2]. The disease symptoms are: fever, weight loss, back pain, muscle weakness. The diagnosis for spinal tuberculosis is established with the help of radiographs, blood tests and tuberculin skin tests. The treatment for Pott's disease is a combination of drugs (analgesics and anti-tuberculosis drugs) with spinal immobilization and sometimes surgery in order to drain spinal abscesses or to stabilize the spine[3].

Max Blecher's works and the illness experience as the core of his texts

In spite of his short life, Max Blecher's work approaches a variety of literary styles and genres with a distinct and original voice: first of all, he publishes in 1934 a poetry volume entitled *Corpul transparent* (The Transparent Body); in the following years, 1936 and 1937, he reinvents himself with the help of two novels entitled *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată* (Adventures in Immediate Unreality) and *Inimi cicatrizate* (Scarred Hearts); in 1971, a long time after his death, *Vizuina luminată:*

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[2] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/472936/Pott-disease, accessed on 30 May 2012.

[3] For more information on Pott's disease from a medical perspective see: http://www.physioline.in/potts-disease.html, accessed on 30 May 2012.

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Jurnal de sanatoriu (The Lit Up Burrow: A Sanatorium Journal) is published along with a series of articles, essays, short fictions and letters [1].

All of Max Blecher's works focus on the disease and especially on the illness[2]: the core of the texts is the fact that they tend to privilege the unique experience of the ill in relation to the general profile of the affection. In a sense, for Blecher there is no disease, only ill people; there is no law, only exceptions, and the metamorphosis under the sign of the disease is regarded as an intimate and personal process dependent on many factors such as the environment, the social context and the inner structure.

Critical reception of Max Blecher's works from the standpoint of two major issues: the original voice and the hybrid form

The atypical profile of his writings, on the one hand centered on his illness experience, and heavily infused with aesthetic values, on the other hand, made it difficult for the critics to appreciate and to define them. Until this day there has been no agreement between critics concerning the nature of Blecher's writings, but happily there is a strong recuperatory movement determined to rediscover and reevaluate his works from different perspectives (existentialism, surrealism, authenticism, biographism, expressionism, postmodernism) (Stovicek, 2009: 5).

Along the time, Blecher's work has been defined in a literary context as a hybrid form ranging from journal, confession or "«chronique» of sense adventures"[3] to autobiographical novel. From a contemporary critical standpoint these labels are restrictive and they deny a more adequate multidisciplinary interpretation in which the personal illness experience and the aesthetical values of the author are in an open dialogue, a permanent negotiation in order to configure not only the illness narratives (the stories of the illness), but also the narratives of the ill (the stories contaminated by the dynamics and the rhetoric of disease).

A new point of view on Max Blecher's work with the help of three key instruments: literature and medicine, narrative medicine and pathography

This interpretative gap between life and fiction, between journal and literature, can be overcome with the help of a series of new instruments located at the interference of these two territories: literature and medicine, narrative medicine and pathography.

The first instrument, "literature and medicine", is defined as a "subdiscipline of literary studies that examines the many relations between literary acts and texts and medical acts and texts" (Charon, 2000: 23).

In this context, "Our bodies are texts" (Charon, 2006: 122) and it is necessary to approach the illness experience through the second instrument, "narrative medicine", or in other words a "medicine practiced with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness"[4].

The third instrument, the "pathography" or the "illness biography" (Loewe, 2004: 42), is defined by medical anthropology as "a narrative of an illness, usually written by a patient or a patient's relative or friend" (Hudson Jones, 1990: 21), in which

[1] For our analysis we used the following versions: Max Blecher, 1999; M. Blecher, 1971.
[2] For more on the differences between illness, disease and sickness see Danou, Olivier *et alii.*, 1998: 153-155.
[3] Gheorghe, 2009, "«cronica» unor aventuri ale simțurilor".
[4] Charon, 2006: vii. For the author "narrative medicine" is "A clinical cousin of literature-and-medicine and a literary cousin of relationship-centered care".

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disease acts leaving a "mysterious signature" (Morris, 2000: 1) dependent on the scientific and cultural paradigm and the interior structure of the sick person. The "illness narratives" (Loewe, 2004: 42) have a therapeutically function in the healing process and they represent a negotiation of one's status, a type of a verbal map of the journey from healthy to ill.

Illness is a space of becoming in which the dismantlement of the puzzle of life is a synonym for the fragmentation of speech. For Blecher being sick and writing about sickness are interconnected and cannot be analyzed separately. The real life and the fictional life, on the one hand, and the personal illness experience and the possible life scenarios, on the other hand, are all contained in his works that can be regarded as a mix between classic pathography and a form of a atypical pathography, in this case the pathography of a literary character.

Blecher's writing is in a way a journal of the alter-egos[1], related to the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, in the sense that the illness experience is recorded in an heterogeneous style which is sensitive on the way each Other him from the other dimensions accommodates itself in the new life of pain, solitude and silence.

The illness experience acts as an identity revealer and in the same time as a modulator for the narrative voice: faced with a tragic diagnosis Blecher refuses to be just a passive instance as a patient and he assumes also an active role as a "film director" of his life in his writings where he can go beyond recording his experiences by processing them through the filter of unreality, defined as "an elastic concept of reality, which comprises the phantasmatic, the metaphoric and the delirious"[2].

The irony of the whole situation lies in the fact that Max Blecher is forced by his illness to stop his studies at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris; in this way the fate blurs the medical discourse and turns it into a literary discourse. In a way, Blecher's writing is reminiscent of the medical treatment: the author administrates himself a series of narratives from the double position of patient and director. Thus, the role of the sick becomes a profession, as the narrator himself confesses.

The disease imagery: constitutive elements

Max Blecher's writings have a few recurrent images, symbols and structures that articulate in a coherent way the discourse of the disease. The distinctive feature of these recurrent images is that they are represented as intersection points between a positive and a negative side, in other words they have a dual nature.

For example, the spaces in Blecher's works can be both good, spaces of retreat, hidden, calm and invigorating, like the garden, the sea or the cellar, but they can also be evil, agitated, consuming, provoking the disease, like the sanatorium rooms, or the confined places. In an analogous way the body itself transforms into a space characterized by a "double nature […] prison […] and space of absolute freedom gained with the help of the visionary experience"[3].

[1] For a complementary theory see Moscaliuc, 2009: 9-11, a description of Blecher's work as a permanent battle between a "sponge" ego and an impermeable ego, one belonging to unreality, the other to reality.

[2] Mironescu, 2009, "un concept elastic de realitate, care cuprinde şi fantasmaticul, şi metaforicul, şi delirantul".

[3] Răsuceanu, 2009, "Dubla natură […] – temniță […] şi spațiu al libertății absolute, dobîndite prin intermediul experienței vizionare".

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Sleep is both a trap and an escape: either prisoner of nightmares or charmed traveller, the night time offers itself to the sick as a time of exploration. The fine line drawn between reality and the dream is reflected in the fading contour of objects, in the overlapping spaces and in the obsessive question about the nature of the moment.

The horse, on the other hand, acts both as a friend, a help, and it is linked to mobility, but he is also a member of the funeral procession[1], a reminder of Death through its frozen and putrid image, the skull.

Blecher's writings expand the territory of illness or the "kingdom of the sick" (Sontag, 1995): there is a silent communion between the sick person and the environment, so that the mud becomes an atypical wound, the medium acts as a "corset" (Chiriță, 2009) and the rain stands as a correspondent phenomenon for the tears, the disintegration of the human body or the blood.

In conclusion, we can state that all of Blecher's works, described as "painfully alive book[s]"[2], in which the indifference of the ones around, the loneliness and the pain act as a type of social barrier in the same way the plaster "prevents" any human contact, need to be reevaluated from a multidisciplinary perspective: they are neither pathographies nor literature, but a special type of writings that merge these two views into a powerful narrative which expels the illness to a place where it can be tamed with the help of words.

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[1] For an interesting interpretation of the carriage in relation to the "Charon complex" see Cesereanu, 2009: 7-9.

[2] Ioanid, 2009, "o carte dureros de vie".

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