

**In celebration of the first Polish edition of the practical volume of
Gestalt Therapy: Excitation and Growth in the Human Personality
(1951) by F.S. Perls, R.H. Hefferline and P. Goodman**



Anselm Kiefer (1995) *Zweistromland*

„it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality”

(Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951, 227)

This succinct bold statement, found at the very beginning of the theoretical volume of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (1951), entitled *Novelty, Excitement and Growth*, which in Polish was published for the first time just over one year ago in 2022 by Oficyna Związek Otwarty (OZO), outlines the area of special interest for exponents of the Gestalt therapy approach to psychotherapy. Contact is the beating heart of Gestalt therapy and the guiding thread running through both volumes of its founding text written by Frederick S. Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline and Paul Goodman; popularly known as PHG after the names of three authors. In the coming days, the same publishing company will release the first Polish edition of the highly anticipated second volume of this two-part publication, entitled *Mobilizing Self*, which contains its equally important practical part.

The first Polish language edition of the practical volume marks the crowning achievement of a project intended to make available to Polish readers the entirety of the work, which is an exposition of the philosophical foundations, methodology and practice of the Gestalt therapy approach to

psychotherapy – a theory and method, the origins of which were already emerging in the last years of World War II. To a large extent, the idea of Gestalt therapy, or at least as it is described in this book, represents a direct response to the catastrophic disruption of the very core human contact functions. The breakdown of healthy contact functioning had oiled the wheels of the unstoppable rise to prominence of totalitarian ideologies such as Nazism and Communism, along with the shattering of the foundations of humanism and its associated values, which later led to the overpowering growth of the authoritarian fascist regime, the persecution and extermination of Jews and persons of other minorities and diversities, and, lastly, the cruel total war resulting in the collapse of the existing fragile world order and unimaginable loss and destruction. To paraphrase T.S. Elliott, ‘if hell is where nothing connects,’ then Gestalt therapy, whose two main originators, Frederick and Laura Perls, survived inferno of the second world war as refugees who experienced persecution and exile, has been intended to restore healthy contact functions that with a bit of luck could prevent that hell on earth from ever repeating itself. PHG seems to be a testament of their effort and aspirations born out of these tragic circumstances.

Some of this historical and biographical context is referred to briefly in the ‘Introduction to The Polish Edition of *Mobilizing Self*’ by Perry Klepner, an eminent American psychotherapist and teacher of Gestalt therapy, who originally trained with Laura Perls, Isadore From and Richard Kitzler, and who for many years has been organising regular groups reading PHG line by line in accordance with their recommendations. In his introduction, Klepner also illuminates the ‘GT’s reliance on contact and presence, of being in touch, the “what is” that resides in the experience of what is felt and understood. Its experimental approach provides the opportunity for the here-now-next of interests, concerns, and feelings to be explored in a spontaneous, creative process’ (Klepner, 1924, 16-18). I am grateful to Perry for bringing to the attention of Polish readers those key aspects of Gestalt therapy that have shaped our approach to psychotherapy from the very beginning, making it truly existential; presence/absence, contact/disconnect; life and death. As far as I know, up to now, very little has been written in the Polish language about this crucial aspect of Gestalt therapy, together with its historical and political background, and turbulent and painful origins. I want us to pay more attention to this particular context, in which Gestalt therapy emerged, and the personal stories and biographies of the main initiators of this school of psychotherapy, in particular Frederick and Laura Perls, who as German Jews had direct experience of war trauma, anti-Semitism, persecution, the Holocaust and exile that significantly influenced the theory, and indeed the method, they developed and practiced. While experiencing tremendous joy and equally great relief at having completed work on the first Polish edition of both volumes of PHG, I felt a strong desire to refer again to the existential dimension that lies at the heart of Gestalt therapy and which is directly related to the historical context in which it was conceived.

When addressing this particular theme, it is vital to remember that Gestalt therapy incorporates also elements of the cultural heritage of the so-called ‘expressionist generation’, to which both, Frederick and Laura Perls, belonged while they were still living in pre-war Berlin – ‘a generation of

nonconformists and truth-seekers willing to take risks' (Bocian, 2010). As is known from reminiscences by people who had the opportunity to meet them in person and various biographies (Gaines, 1979; Rosenfeld, 1982; Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, Gregory, 2001, Resnick, 2019), Frederick was an educated pragmatic man, who had a prior first-hand experience of the atrocities and pain inflicted by war while serving as German Army medic in the trenches during World War I, the legacy of which resulted in his considerable trauma, and which had made him both cynical and somewhat devoid of illusions. His acute attention and quick-thinking, exceptionally sharp tongue and characteristic wit endured. Throughout his life, he pursued the love of theatre, which he nurtured by moving in the milieu of intellectual bohemians, Max Reinhardt, Brecht, Kurt Weil, and in Bauhaus and Dadaist artistic circles. His twelve years younger wife, on the other hand, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, was a widely read academic with an in-depth knowledge of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. Laura was inspired by music and modern dance, regularly attended Elsa Gindler's classes and was interested in everything to do with the body, sensation and expressive movement; she excelled at playing the piano. She was also well acquainted with the leading figures of culture and art of that pre-war period in the capital of the Weimar Republic known then as the 'island of freedom' because of the emphasis in the 1920s Berlin on authenticity and creativity, choice and tolerance. Both of them were also left-leaning intellectuals from the early 1930s actively involved in the Anti-Fascist League; Frederick regularly taught at the Marxistische Arbeiterschule in Berlin (Bocian, 2010, 244-253). The founding text of Gestalt therapy, especially its practical volume, based almost entirely on Perls' manuscript written while still in exile in South Africa, is a kind of testimony to the liberal-democratic and avant-garde values of that generation. It also seems to fill in the gaps in the pre-Nazi history of so-called radical psychoanalysis, since both Frederick and his wife were then essentially practicing analysts.

In its new iteration as the work of three authors, PHG is both a product of their frustration with the attempts to reconstruct the unsatisfactory outdated social organisations, institutions and patriarchal power structures of the pre-war period and the growth of a confluent consumerist culture in the post-war period in the United States. The main victim of this neurotic transmutation witnessed in the late 1940s and early 1950s were once again the essential contact functions of human beings, a trend described meticulously by Paul Goodman in theoretical volume of PHG, in particular in his chapter 'Human Nature and Anthropology'. 'The repressed unused natures then tend to return as Images of the Golden Age, or Paradise, or as theories of the Happy Primitive. We can see how great poets, like Homer and Shakespeare, devoted themselves to glorifying precisely the virtues of the previous era, as if it were their chief function to keep people from forgetting what it used to be to be a man. And at best, indeed, the conditions of advancing civilized life seem to make important powers of human nature not only neurotically unused but rationally unusable' (PHG, 1951, 318). Thus, *Gestalt Therapy* can be seen, in a way, to be a warning for future generations and a strong encouragement to cultivate contact functions,

which are as crucial to the daily life of every single individual as for the survival of humanity as a whole.

From the opening line of the theoretical volume *Novelty, Excitement and Growth*, which begins with the words: ‘Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment’ (id., 227), through the remarkably sophisticated and complex exposition of a radically new theory based on facilitating the rise of awareness, all the way to the experiments aimed at increasing contact with actuality through the uncovering and assimilation of projections that conclude practical volume, the authors set out to explore and describe the phenomenon of contact as thoroughly as possible as a key aspect of human experience making it the centrepiece of their inquiry. Moreover – and this has been probably the most novel aspect of the second volume entitled *Mobilizing Self*, they are inventive and generous so much so as to invite the readers to join them in their endeavour. From the moment one opens the first page of the book and begins to read carefully, the reader becomes an investigator of their own contact functions and soon, before they even know it, also an adept at the art/method proposed by its authors. By engaging in the immediate, aware contact with one’s ongoing experience and self-regulation in the course of the self-conducted experiments that comprise practical volume of PHG, it thus becomes possible to get more tangibly acquainted with one’s own thoroughly relational nature and ‘one’s own self’ as the organising and unifying agent that nurtures growth of the whole human organism, body/mind. (For a detailed analysis of the practical volume including the experimental aspect of Gestalt therapy see Perry Klepner’s *Introduction* in the Polish edition of PHG, 1951/2024, 12-38.)

Similarly, during a therapy session in the consulting room or on a virtual platform via computer, in groups or individually, Gestalt therapists invite clients to join in the therapeutic process and engage with them to explore and discover together how they create and give form to their individual experiences as they are being revealed in the ongoing contact between them. Experience is never simply given, but is created by ourselves at the boundary/contact. ‘Experience is the function of this boundary, and psychologically what is real are the “whole” configurations of this functioning, some meaning being achieved, some action completed’ (PHG, 1951, 227).

Contact/boundary – the meeting place of the individual and their environment – the place where meanings are created and growth occurs, is the awareness of difference that forms the basis of the meeting of the therapist and the client; ‘*psychology studies the operation of the contact-boundary in the organism/environment field*’ (id., 229). This kind of boundary does not run between them, but rather belongs to both of them, and is formed through their mutual contact. Their contact is the touch touching the touch that touches. ‘*All contact is creative adjustment of the organism and environment. [...] We may then define: psychology is the study of creative adjustments. Its theme is the ever-renewed transition between novelty and routine, resulting in assimilation and growth. Correspondingly,*

abnormal psychology is the study of the interruption, inhibition, or other accidents in the course of creative adjustment' (id., 230-231).

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Have a look at the picture on the first page of this article. This is a photograph of Anselm Kiefer's monumental painting entitled *The Land of the Two Rivers (Zweistromland, 1995)* composed of acrylic, lead, zinc plates and salt, which is in the permanent collection of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. I saw this painting for the first time during my visit to this stunning Spanish town in 2016. I was so inspired by Kiefer's art that I wrote most of what is now this article, with only a few additional tweaks I made over time. Initially, I used it as a study-aid on Gestalt concept of contact and change when introducing the social and historical context of Gestalt therapy theory to participants of a programme of PHG-based workshops that I co-led together with Ewa Canert-Łąka in Warsaw in Poland 2016/2017.

Take a closer look at the above photograph of the painting. Is it not a brilliant metaphor for the phenomenon of contact discussed here? The rippled surface of the canvas seems almost alive, as if all the artist's materials used in the painting were in perpetual contact with each other. To make this painting, Kiefer used alchemy, or the art of connecting – in this case, of two metals, that is intended to create something new, usually more valuable. He passed an electric current through two metal conductors (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2007). The chemical reaction caused the zinc to decompose and form the white salt deposits giving the painting a curious uneven appearance, unparalleled depth and intriguing vividness.

Exactly as is the case in Gestalt therapy, where, for a number of diverse considerations, which the authors do not miss to outline in detail in their book, they find it most appropriate to focus on the structure of the present situation as a task of creative adjustment 'to try for an altogether new synthesis and make this the chief point of the session' (PHG, 1951, 286). 'By working on the unity and disunity of this structure of the experience here and now, it is possible to remake the dynamic relations of the figure and ground until the contact is heightened, the awareness brightened and the behavior energized. Most important of all, *the achievement of a strong gestalt is itself the cure, for the figure of contact is not a sign of, but is itself the creative integration of experience'* (id., 232). It is the meeting of two persons in these special conditions that becomes an act of metamorphosis, as it does in alchemy or art.

The painting shown above represents Mesopotamia – an ancient land in the Middle East situated at the interweaving of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. A number of cultures, nations and empires developed in this area in antiquity, formed by different populations (Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Amorites, Hurrians, Kassites, Chaldeans), but continuing a common cultural heritage. Analogous to how contact is understood in Gestalt therapy – where it refers to creative adjustment, that is, the process of existing structures interacting and clashing with each other, creating a dynamic tension of the whole they all form together – the communities and people inhabiting 'the land of the two rivers' have

collaborated, conquered and intertwined with each other for thousands of years. It is widely recognised that it was in the lands of Mesopotamia that the first civilization was born. It was also here that the Sumerians invented the written word in the 4th millennium BC.

From the perspective of Gestalt therapy, contact represents a constructive aggression through which reorganisation occurs and something new is formed; in this case, PHG refers to ‘destruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ which ‘refer here, not to literal reduction to fragments of the physical object, but to our own behavior with respect to the object’ (PHG, 1951, 68). Aggression, understood in this broader sense of its clinical application, ‘includes everything that an organism does to initiate contact with its environment’ (ibid., 70); aggression ‘is indispensable to happiness and creativity’ (id., 148). Just as in Gestalt therapy the fluid cyclical nature of creation and destruction characterises the so-called good contact (and health), the process of breakdown and transformation inherent in Kiefer’s work gives his art its true enduring value. The artist does not shy away from constantly confronting this tragic yet unavoidable nature of things; ‘La mort seule est certaine’ (Guy de Maupassant, 1885, *Bel-Ami*). ‘If there were no death, there would be no us’ – Kiefer said in one of his interviews, ‘This is how we are defined.... A creature that is reborn in death’ (Cohen, 2022, 339).

In terms of the form, subject matter and philosophy, Kiefer’s art attempt to grapple with the aesthetic and ethical dilemma of depicting the impossible to depict – a historical catastrophe, the effects of which artist experienced personally. His work mediates the relationship between a deeply traumatic history that, as a German man born after the end of World War II, and his audience after the Holocaust, are no longer able to fully know, but to which his art bears witness (Heimannsberg & Schmidt, 1993). Through his artworks, the direct transmission of this thoroughly personal story becomes possible, and thus it becomes actualised in our own experience as its audience; it grows into being public and timeless.

As fate would have it, Mesopotamian civilisation was also almost entirely destroyed when the Tigris and Euphrates surged from their banks, turning everything into mud. At the same time, the rivers irrigated the surrounding arid fields, stimulating the growth of new species of plants, quenched thirsty animals and contributed to the development of agriculture, thereby increasing the crops. All the many layers of paint in Kiefer’s painting, along with a white crust of salt, are reminiscent of the strata of sediment in riverbeds that record the passage of time. And the electric current employed by the artist as the creative technique on his piece, like the ancient waters, acted both as a destructive force and a source of new life. The title inscribed by the author in the upper right corner of the painting can be seen as an allusion to the written word, one that leaves a lasting mark, transcending the realm of any civilisation or era.

Kiefer’s painting *The Land of the Two Rivers* is preceded by his sculpture of the same name consisting of two monumental bookcases (which, as in the painting, represent the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) holding some two hundred books made of lead, all constructed on a superhuman scale. Some of

the books are empty; others contain objects such as blurry photographs of clouds or dried peas. Like the painting, his sculpture is a multi-layered work dedicated to artifacts of knowledge and experience, an expression of which are books that were ceremonially burned under fascism to ‘purge the non-Germanic spirit’. Even if public destruction of books by fire has a long history and has been carried out by authorities many times throughout the history in their efforts to suppress dissenting or heretical views that are believed to pose a threat to the existing order, this instance of book burning in Nazi Germany and Italy became emblematic of a harsh and oppressive regime which is seeking to silence the expression of prevailing culture and foreshadowing a massive wave of violence, real and symbolic.



Anselm Kiefer (1985-89) *Zweistromland, The High Priestess*

The oeuvre of this multi-faceted author, who is unique among post-war German artists in his relentless exploration of the legacy of fascism, is thus simultaneously intended to convey a sense of the enduring nature of the written word and history. Kiefer, for whom the book motif has run throughout his artistic career, said in an interview: ‘A book – the idea of a book or an image of a book – is a symbol of learning and transmitting knowledge.... I create my own books so that I can make my own path in the maze of old stories’ (Celant, 2011, 120). For him, books are a symbol of civilisation, but in his sculpture *The Land of the Two Rivers* with the subtitle ‘The Priestess’, which symbolises a powerful tarot card used to foretell the future, most of them rest locked in heavy lead bindings. Many perceive the piece as an expression of how difficult it is to transfer knowledge over time.

A similar aim of transmitting knowledge through time was also guiding the authors of the founding text of PHG, as one can read in the *Author’s Note* written by Frederick Perls to the 1971 Bantam edition of *Gestalt Therapy*, a reprint of which we have also chosen to include in the Polish edition of the practical volume of *Gestalt Therapy* (1951/2024). The essential knowledge referred to in

this book ‘applies as much to our inner conflicts as it applies to the world situation in general’. And because it deals with issues that, as Perls writes, might just contribute to ‘the survival of mankind,’ the authors of *Gestalt Therapy* put considerable effort into making their message as inclusive and direct as possible, and so that it reaches out and personally touches every engaged reader (PHG, 1951/1996, vi).

While the theoretical volume may seem to many as if it were a book made of lead taken directly from Kiefer’s sculpture, because of its inaccessibility due to its use of extremely intricate and complex language and the fact that it requires a great deal of the reader’s effort and careful attention, the practical volume is very different. Here the authors try to talk to the reader, as if they ‘were face to face’ (PHG, 1951, 5). In addition, this second volume, which includes a whole series of specially constructed experiments and hands-on exercises, has the character of a textbook and enables the reader to work independently with the aim ‘to observe your self in action – ultimately, to observe your self *as* action,’ which brings with it the potential for better understanding of oneself and the surrounding world (id., 3). The PHG reader gets to witness and have the chance to experience firsthand the ‘radical change in the way the self is viewed in Gestalt therapy, which is no longer treated as a fixed structure (one’s own Self), but is defined as a continuous process of action: *selfing* – a system of continuous creative adjustment of the individual and a changing environment’ (PHG, 1951/2024, *Endnotes*, 413).

The second volume is a practical application of Gestalt theory of self, the essence of which is to set in motion and increase a variety of contact activities, such as seeing, hearing, movement and touch, bodily experience, thinking, vivid imagination and expression, including communicating thoughts and experience in words, verbalising or the act of naming and speaking. By means of lively contacting, the experiential awareness of how we act and what we do in our phenomenological field is expanded moment by moment, and newer and newer sensations, insights, choices and behaviours are formed that are even more relevant to the actual situation. One’s sense of agency and risk-taking to explore the unknown is enhanced in this process. Such a healthy, aware individual – aware of themselves and their environment, has actually a better chance of survival and a more favourable chance of living and growing with a better understanding of the world, that is, a more accurate grasp of connections and interrelationships and overall, a more ecological and social existence. ‘Growth and identity cannot be had as a monad, but only through dialogue and within a social network that confirms the value of the individual’ (Bocian, 2010, 255).

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The first Polish edition of the two volumes of *Gestalt Therapy* is a major achievement not only for Polish Gestalt therapists, but for the entire community of psychotherapists and psychologists representing a wide variety of theoretical and clinical modalities, who have been missing this essential foundational book for more than 70 years. It is possible that for some, the juxtaposition of this particular event with the work of Anselm Kiefer, is a too far-fetched metaphor and may be objectionable.

However, I dare to argue that in the case of the incredible importance of this formative work for the history of psychotherapy, and Gestalt therapy in particular, their joint presentation is by no means unreasonable. On the contrary, to speak of the Polish edition of the entire PHG as if in ‘one breath’ with the work of one of the most influential artists of contemporary art representing his fascination with the creation and transmission of culture, especially in the form of the written word and books, is most relevant. Moreover, such a pairing exposes the less visible aspects of Gestalt therapy and its history, as well as tacit commonalities and connections between these disparate yet close messages about life and intrinsically human values, its breathing existential underbelly.

Like Frederick and Laura Perls, the author of both works of art entitled *The Land of the Two Rivers* was born in Germany. His family home was destroyed by a bomb on the night of his birth amid the last apocalyptic months of the war. ‘And then as a child I didn’t have *Spielzeuge* – no toys,’ says the artist, ‘so I made toys from the rubble of the destroyed house’ (Jones, 2023). Kiefer’s childhood in a devastated country, next to the ruins of his family home, has made him the artist he is: one who unearths the ruins of modern history. His paintings and installations draw on the nightmares of the past with care and, at the same time, undisguised fascination, and embody the leitmotif he has explored throughout his career: ‘Life can be cruel and humanity destructive, but amidst the ruined landscape of our lives there is always hope’ (Jones, 2023).

Likewise, the life of the Perlses exemplifies the suffering that was typical of their generation and brings out its immense creativity. In their case, though, as Jews and representatives of the leftist social avant-garde movement, they were forced to flee Germany in the face of the rising tide of fascism and persecution of the early 1930s out of concern for their own lives. Before the war, as German Jews, they, along with many others, had made significant contributions to the Expressionist movement, both on a personal level and in terms of content, and also, along with a small number of others, were carriers of a radical version of the psychoanalytic movement (Lichtenberg, 1969; Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993; Heimannsberg, Schmidt, 1993; Bocian, 2010; Aylward, 2018). Later, as the only few, who managed to escape the Holocaust, despite the tragic events of war and exile, Frederick and Laura Perls succeeded in preserving their culture and values from destruction and were consequently able to integrate them together with their inevitable massive losses into their own unique therapeutic approach, and thus preserve many of their personal life experiences of survival, which they pass on as an enduring value for future generations in the form of the theory and practice they both shaped. At the same time, in contrast to Kiefer, their trauma, the enormity of the losses and their effects left, them to a great extent unable or disinclined to talk openly of their own precarious stories, or indeed tragedies of their immediate families, who together with six million European Jews were murdered between 1933 and 1945. Instead, they had a strong need to engage with the here and now of their new life found in exile and build the better future for themselves and the others who found themselves in similar circumstances. The desire to return to balance or some state of normalcy permanently dominated their perception of

humanity, history, relationships and life in general. Just as for many other significant people of Jewish descent – artists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, forced to flee to the US from their homelands from Nazi persecution and extermination, for the early creators of Gestalt therapy, anarchy along with enquiring into the necessary conditions of so called ‘good contact’, including increased awareness of self and one’s environment that allows us to adequately navigate contact from moment to moment, became an antidote to fascism and a way to create a truly utopian society (Stoehr, 1994; Bocian, 2010).

The historical and political-social context, which has shaped Gestalt therapy from its very inception, which is only occasionally discussed at length, is particularly evident in the practical volume of PHG and has been thoroughly discussed by Bernd Bocian (2010) in a chapter ‘Autonomy instead of Auschwitz’ in his book *Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893 – 1933*. ‘Against the backdrop of two world wars and the experience of fascism and National Socialism, Fritz Perls’ sometimes unbalanced inclination toward individuality and autonomy, and his fundamentally anti-confluent stance, cannot simply be dismissed as a personal problem. [...] The idea is to sharpen the vigilance of the individual, to strengthen people’s ability to make decisions and, if necessary, to resist when the community, the crowd or the greater whole either entices them or demand that they surrender themselves. Although we fully realize that Gestalt therapy was conceived as a relational approach from the very outset, and that this aspect remains one of its strengths to this day, keeping these experiences alive is part of our European legacy. In my view, this numbers among the unrelinquishable treasures of our approach’ (Bocian, 2010, 15-16).

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Finally, let me return once again to the theme of contact being the guiding thread of both volumes of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, notably the aspect that distinguishes the very characteristic Gestalt understanding of the process of contact from its counterpart in everyday language, that is not necessarily always creative (as an example take the routine statement ‘Let’s be in contact, shall we?’). ‘Primarily, in Gestalt therapy, contact is the awareness of, and behavior toward, the assimilable novelty; and the rejection of the unassimilable novelty. [...] We must then conclude that all contact is creative and dynamic. It cannot be routine, stereotyped, or merely conservative because it must cope with the novel, for only the novel is nourishing. [...] *All contact is creative adjustment of the organism and environment*. Aware response in the field (as both orientation and manipulation) is the agency of growth in the field. Growth is the function of the contact-boundary in the organism/environment field; it is by means of creative adjustment, change, and growth that the complicated organic unities live on in the larger unity of the field’ (PHG, 1951, 230).

The same is true of the process of reading. It is well known that reading a book, for instance, is a complex interactive process, especially when reading involves the full engagement and use of contact functions, which authors of *Gestalt Therapy* encourage us to do at every turn. Such a contact-full reading process represents a kind of simultaneous interaction between the reader and the writer. While

reading a book, readers use their own knowledge and previous experience to make sense of the text according to their own actual political and socio-cultural situation; they also might, now and then, confront its content, the authors' conceptualisations and wording, and reject what does not match their own experience. This fully engaged dynamic interactional aspect of reading the text of *Gestalt Therapy* – with aggression – is particularly strongly encouraged by its three authors – Perls, Hefferline and Goodman in their *Introduction to the first 1951 edition*, but also at the very beginning of the first chapter of the second volume, *Mobilizing Self*.

Bearing in mind this process of co-creation of knowledge and experience, the authors recognised that, from the very beginning, it is most essential to build conditions that facilitate the so-called 'good contact' between the reader and the authors of the text, thus fostering an expansion of self-awareness, fuller expression, freer dialogue and, consequently, an increased opportunity to satisfy personal needs, even if for many it may seem like a rather one-sided situation, since an actual, verbal or bodily, exchange between the reader and the authors of the book is actually impossible. Nonetheless, bringing to the attention of the reader their opportunity to enjoy the book in such a lively engaging and exciting way is of vital importance from a substantive point of view of Gestalt therapy.

Like any contact, the process of reading a book requires a boundary where differences define and meet to form together something entirely new – something other than their sum. While the style with which the theoretical volume was written was intended, according to some sources (Stoehr, 1994; Goodman, 2011; Kitzler, 2008), to prevent introjection – swallowing whole without distinguishing or assimilating, the opportunity for observation and more insight into all kinds of experiences occurring at the boundary/contact while reading the practical volume of the foundational work of Gestalt therapy are the experiments included in most of the chapters in this part of the book. Although the vast majority of these experiments or exercises for expanding attention and self-awareness are probably well known to readers, as they have been in constant use in the practice of Gestalt therapy for more than 70 years ever since PHG was first published in 1951, nevertheless, in this new context of the formative text, reader feel as if they are discovering themselves completely anew; at times, one might even feel as if one is 'creating oneself on the spot'.

It is also worth noting on this occasion the crucial importance that the activity of orientation has in any behaviour. It is not at all surprising that the first part of the practical volume, as many as four chapters in all, in which the authors focus on describing healthy functioning, is entitled 'Orienting self'. When referring to *orienting self*, the authors had not only intended a sense of direction, but also an activity similar to orienting a map, which involves giving a sheet of paper such a position so as to get the directions on the map to correspond with the corresponding directions on the ground.

During the period when the theory of Gestalt therapy was being refined, Frederick Perls and Paul Goodman were heavily influenced by general semantics – a philosophical and sociological trend

concerning language, initiated by Alfred Korzybski, a Polish-American engineer and philosopher. At the time, general semantics was primarily concerned with the impact of language on consciousness and the possibility of improving interpersonal relations by improving language. Errors that burden language and negatively affect society include imprecision, a tendency to over-abstraction, vagueness, which leads to increased susceptibility to manipulation of various kinds. Therefore, on the political level, the negative impact of language on society can be seen, according to general semantics, especially in the totalitarian or populist regime and in the language with which totalitarianism and populism operate. The similar argument of the role of language in totalitarianism that results in creation of a mechanised human was made by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published for the first time in 1951, the same year as PHG.

From the point of view of phenomenology, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1936/1970) wrote about very similar manifestation just before the outbreak of World War II in his book *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, where he considered the essence of the breakdown that led to the rise of the two great totalitarianisms, the rejection of the rationalist tradition of European philosophy. Nazism and communism alike stemmed from an artificial split between the emotional and the rational, which is a neurotic split that negates the functional body/mind whole and prevents the effective operation of the individual's contact functions. The totalitarian political reflexes of the time, like the populism that has dominated current political scene in the modern world, in the US, the UK as well as in Poland, are based on blind emotion to the exclusion of rational analysis in their quest to eliminate individual differentiation, isolate the individual and control the masses.

In contrast, Gestalt therapy, which is consistent to a large extent with the theory of anarchism, has from the very beginning challenged all forms of power, coercion and hierarchy and advocated plain speaking that expresses in words the individual's embodied experience and invites the dialogue that emphasises differentiation. It is worth mentioning here that anarchism is not socialism or chaos, it is not yet rebellion or revolution; anarchism is only and above all: a radical scepticism towards structures of power, authority and hierarchy, from the traditional family system (where the male, the father, dominated) to imperialism (Chomsky, 2014, Aylward, 2018).

For that very reason, there is no talking of empathy in PHG. This ever-popular concept, thought in general psychology and many schools of psychotherapy as being central for constituting humans as social creatures, has always been viewed with suspicion in Gestalt therapy as a form of passive confluence with the dominant system of meanings and values; see for instance 'Experiment 12: Investigation Misdirected Behavior' in *Mobilizing Self*, in particular when the authors' discuss pity, sympathy and compassion (PHG, 1951, 154-161). As I seem to remember the notable British psychotherapist Peter Philippon once said at a seminar that rather than empathy and attunement, *Gestalt Therapy* speaks of dialogue that emphasises differentiation and contact (personal conversation).

This implies existence of contact boundaries that both join and separate self and other – ‘the creative integration of experience’ and growth that occurs at the contact-boundary in the individual/environment field (id., 227-232). In Gestalt therapy, contact is thought of as being driven by dental aggression in this broader sense of approaching the other with concern or desire and meeting the novel, and in the process that destroys fixed structures, chewing and tasting, identifying with and rejecting, changing and being changed, and ultimately assimilating and creating new meanings. ‘Contact is made in any actual present situation, the only moment in which experience and change is possible.... It is the acknowledgment of, and the coping with, the *other*. The boundary where I and the other meet is the locus of the ego functions of identification and alienation, the sphere of excitation, interest and curiosity or fear and hostility’ (L. Perls, 1992, 131).

In an article that focuses on exploring the existential aspect of Gestalt therapy, it is also worth noting that, even if the authors of its foundational text frequently speak of their hope when encouraging readers to engage in the task they suggest – being it attentive reading of their text or carrying out the experiments, as in the sentence such as, ‘the hope is that one day the structure of the neurotic elements, progressively enfeebled, will collapse’, in PHG, there is no mention of hope as a unidimensional motivational force, which has played a significant part in other contemporaneous schools of psychology and psychotherapy (i.e. Adlerian psychoanalysis, Snyder and Seligman’s positive psychology) and remained a key concept in most major world religions, evident for instance in St Paul’s cardinal virtues: faith, hope and love. This daring move has given Gestalt therapy a much deeper meaning and a much more genuine-sounding existential dimension that seem to flow directly from personal experience of its founders. Having said that, paradoxically faith tangibly underpins all the project that Gestalt therapy represents, including the plan of both volumes of PHG. But while ‘faith is knowing, beyond awareness, that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot: one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background will produce the means’, hope implies the promise that something will be better in the future, the “hoper” believes an individual or group will reach some concept of heaven, which is clearly at odds with the Gestalt therapy premise that death is the only certainty in life (PHG, 1951, 343). In PHG, being present and in touch with the ‘actual present situation’, the “‘here and now” is the lens that offers a view into the whole dynamic of the field of a person’s life’ (Yontef, 2022, 65).

Similarly, Anselm Kiefer does not shy away from engaging in philosophical investigation of the existential theme, together with questioning such revered virtues in our culture as hope. He mentions hope in his interviews frequently and yet his art seems to constantly imply that no exercise of virtue can achieve transcendence, and ‘yet he is constantly asking the question, why not?’ For instance, in his work *Glaube, Hoffnung Liebe* (1984-1986), inspired by the phrase from St Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians (1:13), the artist depicts an airplane propeller with the cardinal virtues inscribed on its three blades, which make up the title of his work, as his regularly used metaphor for the journey into the unknown (see photograph below). The journey here is ‘potentially a flight that would take us into the

heavens and yet the propeller is made of lead and will never fly' (AGNSW, 1987). Like in both artworks entitled *The Land of The Two Rivers* – the painting of a landscape devoid of people and the sculpture consisting of bookcases containing two hundred shut lead books, Kiefer seems to communicate that hopelessness is an essential quality of human condition and as such facing it, no matter how hard, is the only way to journey through life and death.



Anselm Kiefer (1984-86) *Glaube, Hoffnung Liebe*

And so, whilst a sentiment of hope, like a ‘fluffy’ blanket, can bring some much needed but only temporary relief and comfort on our journey into the unknown, it is the awareness of death itself and the unflinching acceptance that our life is finite, together with embracing of the associated hopelessness, offers a much firmer ground for supporting our existence (Dan Bloom, 2024, *personal conversation*). Again, Laura Perls seems to have presented this message most clearly in a paper presented at the 1959 annual conference of the American Academy of Psychotherapists. ‘In my experience, being truly creative is inextricably linked to the awareness of our own mortality. The more aware we are of this, the greater becomes the need to create something new and to take part in the creativity that is incontinently occurring in nature. It is the same as what is created during sex and love; what creates the flock and society; what is created from wheat and fruit, bread and wine; from sound and music. This is what makes life bearable at all, and, indeed, what makes life liveable and – incidentally – makes therapy possible.’ (Perls, 1992, 122)

In this respect, Gestalt therapy can seem rather insensitive and lacking in any optimism especially when compared with other humanistic psychotherapies, such as Carl Rogers’ person-centered therapy

or psychosynthesis, which, like Gestalt therapy, rose to prominence in the second half of the 20th century partly as a response to the limitations of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The most likely culprit here is Gestalt psychology, which together with phenomenology, provides our method with firm and unsentimental, but verifiable theoretical foundation. And so, one might consider that in Gestalt therapy, the notion of hope is eroded to the point of being overturned in connection with the phenomenon observed by Gestalt psychologists of so called law of closure or completion of figures and general tendency to fill in the gaps and organising sensory stimuli into meaningful perceptual wholes called the law of Prägnanz, and the application of this theory to the field of human behaviour by Frederick Perls in his first book *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1947), as invoked by the authors in their 'Introduction to the First Edition of PHG'. 'In the struggle for survival the most relevant need becomes figure and organizes the behavior of an individual until this need is satisfied, whereupon it recedes into the background (temporary balance) and makes room for the next now most important need' (PHG, 1951, xi).

Building on this ground, authors of *Gestalt Therapy* ultimately introduced in the seminal text the notion of "creative disinterest" and faith which much better reflect the healthy functioning of contact guided by the spontaneous self than hope. 'Accepting his concern and the object, and exercising the aggression, the creatively impartial man is excited by the conflict and grows by means of it, win or lose; he is not attached to what might be lost, for he knows he is changing and already identifies with what he will become. With this attitude goes an emotion that is the opposite of the sense of security, namely faith: absorbed in the actual activity he does not protect the background but draws energy from it, he has faith that it will prove adequate' (id., 353-354). Analogous to the situation of a spontaneously self-regulating individual, anarchists have always believed in the possibility of highly structured societies organising themselves spontaneously, without any external or top-down control, but democratically. It was the desire of the "finders" of Gestalt therapy, Frederick and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman – a radical political thinker and social critic in his own right, 'unquestionably brilliant, prophetically ahead of his time,' to have a society in which individuals would freely cooperate with each other as equals with decisions taken by consensus; this was the aim guiding the actual therapeutic method they jointly advanced, and it was for this reason that they claimed that Gestalt therapy was a thoroughly political activity (PHG, 1951; Stoehr, 1994; Laura Perls in Rosenfeld, 1982).

To illustrate the point made above, it is worth noting another of Anselm Kiefer's (2008) sculptures entitled *The Language of Birds*. Again, the theme of this artwork involves books. It is an over 4 meters tall bronze sculpture that stands on a base weighing seven tons, which some years ago could be seen on 'The Salzburg Walk of Modern Art' – a free and accessible to everyone art trail that, as the local guide says, 'takes visitors to Salzburg's most beautiful places and hidden treasures, and to places where art is least expected'. The majestic eagle's wings rise from a monumental stack of books – almost as if guarding a treasure. Kiefer says that these wings are a symbol of the fact that the knowledge hidden in

books cannot just be confined to their pages. ‘This impressive object of exceptional symbolism, complexity and intellectual richness, which stood in the courtyard of the Salzburg government headquarters, also refers to politics. Democracy requires education, and education opens up new perspectives and visions’ – said the Salzburg governor at the inauguration of the exhibition (Wuerth News, *Eagle’s wings at Chiemseehof*, Salzburg, 2019).



Anselm Kiefer (2018) *Sprache der Vögel*

The same intention to promote the dissemination and education of relevant content for the humankind guides the entirety of the founding text of *Gestalt Therapy*, and its anarchic nature is particularly evident in the structure of the second volume, *Mobilizing Self*, as well as in the language the authors use throughout this book. From the very beginning of the practical volume, it is easy to see that the authors place their trust in the reader’s self-regulation and rely on such fundamental human desire for contact and connection as the basis for such activities as exploring and orienting, confronting and manipulating, organising and creating meanings. Instead of giving readers pre-prepared lessons and moralising, they put into their hands a manual consisting of a whole host of various experiments and awareness-expanding exercises, in the belief that establishing a better contact with themselves and their environment, along with an increased sensory awareness, will enable them to make their own already autonomous explorations, discoveries and inventions, thus improving both their clinical practice and the very instrument they come to use in their work with clients, namely their own body/mind oneness as therapists.

Returning once again to such an important inherent element of contact in Gestalt therapy as the activity of orientation, it is also worth noting that in the case of orienting a map, in practical terms,

refers to determining the direction in which the upper frame of the map is aimed at. In the case of the Arabs, it was South, in medieval Europe it was East, while today it is commonly assumed to be North. With reference to the Gestalt theory of self, it can be said that selfing (the process of becoming) represents as much the individual's organising capacities as the very process of shaping the individual by his environment, including physical, social, political, cultural and material conditions. For this reason, in writing this article I have chosen to focus in large part on the post-war landscape in the context of which Gestalt therapy was created, taking into account the social and historical biographical backgrounds of its founders, particularly Frederick and Laura Perls, the ideas of whom the vast majority of PHG's practical volume is based upon.

Here, too, it is vital to emphasise what is particularly important, namely that Gestalt therapy, then, in the 1950s, as it is now, just over 70 years later, is by no means a monolith; nor is it some orthodoxy universally accepted by those who practice it. There are, of course, individuals and training institutions who, in order to maintain power and influence, seek to artificially stop the course of time or determine what is and what is not Gestalt at all costs. 'But ideas shape and adapt over time, for better or worse. Gestalt is not only process psychology, but a process in itself. One of its undeniable strengths is its recognition of fluidity and constantly occurring change. We constitute the land where the Gestalt river originates and from which it flows. The river in turn shapes the land' (Houston, 2003, 138).

From the very beginning, in New York, even before Fritz and Laura Perls went their separate ways, both personally and professionally, there were already many different versions and interpretations of Gestalt therapy; the emphasis was on different aspects of it. One of my Gestalt masters, Joel Latner (1973, 1983), noted that 'before even Gestalt therapy had left its place of conception, it had already managed to quarrel with itself'. These early years saw a split between Gestalt therapy, which was more intellectual and theoretical, and the more impulsive, expression-oriented and experiential work. They began to emphasise the regional differences that supposedly characterised the Gestalt that existed on the East Coast (e.g., at the New York Gestalt Therapy Institute – NYGTI, where the entirety of PHG is still studied line by line) from that which originated on the West Coast (in Los Angeles or Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California), or at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, heavily influenced by Kurt Lewin's group dynamics research and the organisational change leadership model he created. Since Gestalt therapy commenced to spread outside the United States, there has been talk of differences in its practice between therapists from the US, South America and Europe, the UK, Eastern Europe and Italy, Poland, Russia and Spain. In addition, the term so-called relational Gestalt therapy has recently begun to be used to distinguish contemporary Gestalt therapy from the extremely individualistic and bombastic model that Fritz Perls practiced quite independently in the second half of the 1960s and 1970s.

Even though I have been passionate about PHG for years and treat this work as a goldmine of knowledge about therapeutic theory and practice and life in general, I don't hold inflexibly to the

concepts presented in this book. I am certain that adhering too rigidly to this formula would have prevented me from occasionally losing my 'path' and wandering off enough to stumble upon some gems that were not mentioned in PHG. Still, I think of this text as being like a compass that I pay attention to time and again on my journey into the unknown. 'The therapist needs his conception in order to keep his bearings, to know in what direction to look. It is the acquired habit that is the background for this art as in any other art. But the problem is the same as in any art: how to use this abstraction (and therefore fixation) so as not to lose the present actuality and especially the ongoingness of the actuality? and how – a special problem that therapy shares with pedagogy and politics – not to impose a standard rather than help develop the potentialities of the other?' (PHG, 1951, 448).

From my point of view, the most important thing is to have a good knowledge of the basic assumptions of our approach and to make aware choices about how to use them in practice, depending on the specific clinical situation and socio-political context we live in and the individual client we are working with. What sets Gestalt therapy approach apart from others, as someone cleverly summarised, is the special attention we give to field theory (in other words, context), process (not just content), subjectivity of our client (not diagnosis), curiosity (not judgment), experimentation (not techniques) and health (not just pathology). In addition, diversity and creativity are highly valued as manifestations of health (as opposed to routine, stereotyping or lack of personal colour).

The two volumes of *Gestalt Therapy* form an inseparable whole that is a synthesis of the above-mentioned elements, provide a sound understanding of the theoretical and practical basis of the Gestalt therapy approach to psychotherapy, and have a timeless value. Moreover, this very theoretical and practical interpretation of Gestalt therapy that is the book by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman remains an invariably solid base of knowledge and experience, so that one is endlessly confronted with it, repelled by it or supported by it. Such ongoing creative contact with our foundational text enables each practitioner to successfully develop their own therapeutic style and practice based on their specific needs and the context in which it comes for them to work. Likewise, more broadly, a thorough familiarity with both volumes of the foundational text provides a basis that enables to continually enrich, articulate and support the ever-emerging figure that is the Gestalt therapy approach to psychotherapy.

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