

BOOK REVIEWS

MIROŚLAW PIECHOWIAK

A BOOK FOR EVERYONE... BUT NOT FOR ANYONE

Irvin D. Yalom, *When Nietzsche Wept: A Novel of Obsession*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992

Polish edition: Irvin D. Yalom, *Kiedy Nietzsche szlochał*, Warsaw: Institute of Health Psychology, Polish Psychological Association, 2005, Translated by Anna Tanalska-Dulęba

“Nobody can build the bridge for you to walk across the river of life, no one but you yourself alone. There are, to be sure, countless paths and bridges and demi-gods which would carry you across this river; but only at the cost of yourself; you would pawn yourself and lose. There is in the world only one way, on which nobody can go, except you”.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Perhaps it would not be an overstatement to say that the publishing market lacks literature (as it does film adaptations and plays) in which great philosophers are the main protagonists. Thus, many of us crave deeper knowledge of their lives and, what seems even more interesting, wish to learn more about their ways of handling their own lives.

We are aware that they knew much about life and have left the heritage of countless signposts on the path of life, which, ever alive, are fortunately still accessible in their great works. However, in the majority of philosophical cases we deal with a peculiar paradox of an outstanding work which overshadows its author and his/her life. This situation has been fundamentally changed by a Professor of Psychiatry, Irvin D. Yalom, who boldly invites the reader to participate in an extraordinary story based on carefully selected moments of insanity from the life of an eminent German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. The author introduces the figure of a renowned Viennese physician, Josef Breuer, in order to achieve the clarity of the reconstructed biographical plot, which, combined with Nietzsche's philosophical works, creates a fascinating picture of the Philosopher's struggle with the hardships of life. The reader becomes a witness to and frequently even a participant in the dialogue that balances within a specific range of philosophical (Nietzschean) and medical expressions and spreads over the border of the mutual understanding between a philosopher and a physician. In this dialogue, Yalom includes the story of pain and despair brought about by life.

Nietzsche suffered not only internally because of his constant concern for the fate of man, but also from extreme physical pain. The pain he felt because of a cloudy sky or occasional migraines was unimportant in comparison with the pain of infidelity inflicted on him by Lou Salomé, the only woman he was able to love. This character was given some special significance because it was Lou who was the reason for the main Philosopher's ailment – despair. It seems that for the author of the novel the figure of Lou Salomé conveys two meanings: she is also, and perhaps mostly so, the symbol, an exemplification of the process in the course of which a maturing problem turns into despair. Lou Salomé is not the only woman presented in the novel, nor is Nietzsche the only patient suffering from despair. The reader is surprised by the fact that the physician – Josef Breuer himself – needs a doctor, too, and his ailment is similar – despair brought on by a woman: „His most labile states of mind involved women” (p. 15). Thus both, the physician and the philosopher, suffer from the same ailment caused by identical factors. At this point Yalom, using a skillful dialogue as a carrier, begins a *lecture* which, amidst confused emotions, may be overlooked “by some readers”. This *lecture*, which will reappear dynamically throughout the novel, concerns the problem of the differences between science and philosophy. The author undertakes a demanding task: to prove that man, in his fanatical search for Truth, is able to cross the frontiers of mutual incomprehension. For Doctor Breuer the frontier of understanding philosophical matters is delimited by individual cases of specific ailments; each case is the reason for a distinct kind of pain: “You know, Professor Nietzsche, I agree, intellectually, with much you say, but our level of discourse is too *abstract*. It's not *personal* enough to be helpful to me. Maybe I am too wedded to the practical (...) What I need now,” he went on, “is not an abstract, poetic statement but something human, direct” (p. 178-179). For Nietzsche-the philosopher the pain of an individual is not important, what counts to him is the abstract essence of suffering. “And I have no advice for the singular man. I write for the race, for humankind” (p. 139). Using the most human of all themes, love, Yalom draws a clear distinction between the “therapeutic” needs of both men. The physician dreams of a fast and effective method which would help him forget about one of his patients, a woman he fell in love with. The core of his personal drama is that as a husband and a father of four he is obsessed with thinking about his *beloved patient*. He

detaches himself from his family and barely copes with his professional duties. He expects that the Professor of Philosophy will provide him with a ready-made prescription he could fill in the nearest pharmacy, and quickly forget about his condition: “Ah, for a tonsil forceps that could rip out these clusters, roots and all (the anxiety – M.P.)” (p. 75). He does not understand the systematized organization of Nietzsche’s *lectures* but his intuition tells him that only he, Professor of Philosophy, an expert on life, can cure him.

The author of the novel, Professor of Psychiatry, fascinated with philosophy, succeeds in convincing the reader that what is essential in curing despair, a sort of allergy to life, is profound personal wisdom; wisdom the inexhaustible source of which can be only its fanatical follower – Philosopher who knows that “(...) the philosophic cure consists of learning to listen to your own inner voice” (p. 186). By displaying the image of suffering Nietzsche, he warns philosophers and anyone who *despises* the “dull vision” of the world “...only those with dull vision...” (p.179) that despair is the price one has to pay for self-awareness. Everyone who has a profound understanding of life, finds despair (cf. p. 139).

Using a precise selection of quotations, Yalom refers to Nietzsche’s works written before 1882: *Human, All Too Human* and *Gay Science* – excerpts cited from these works are not clearly marked off, they intermingle with the flow of the dialogue and due to the fact that they are not accompanied by scientific discourse the novel remains a book “for everyone” – it does not demand a precise knowledge of the Nietzschean thought. Consequently, a reader who is an expert on Nietzsche’s philosophy will certainly recognize accurately the quoted passages from the Philosopher’s works. By quoting Nietzsche, Yalom discreetly provokes the reader to muse over the everlasting problems of human existence. Special attention ought to be paid to the theme taken from *Human, All Too Human* of the right of man to decide independently about the conscious termination of his own life: “Each person owns his own death. (...) Perhaps – only perhaps – there is a right by which we can take a man’s life. But there is no right by which we can take man’s death. That is not comfort. That is cruelty!”¹ (p. 69).

From the construction of the novel’s world, a reader who is sensitive to the psychological “manipulations” applied by the author – an expert on human sensitivity – will be able to separate themes which readers often describe as “moving scenes.”

However, fascination with such scenes loses its dynamics when we realize the author’s educational profile; then, unfortunately, we detach ourselves from the growing emotions realizing that each feeling aroused intentionally by the author is accessible to “anyone”. Thus, “not for everyone” pertains only to this level of the novel which requires at least some basic knowledge of philosophy – or philosophical sensitivity – that will let us fully apprehend the dramatic value of the fate of the main characters, and, more importantly, enable the reader to participate fully in the therapy in which the only remedy for the patient’s despair is conversation interspersed with philosophical notions. Sigmund Freud, Breuer’s friend and consultant mentioned in the novel, in Josef Breuer’s healing methods – hypnosis and induction of traumatic events from the patient’s past – saw the beginnings of psychoanalysis. The author surprises the reader with a sudden

¹ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ludzkie, arcyлюдzkie (Human, All Too Human)*, Polish translation by Konrad Drzewiecki, Zielona Sowa Publishing House, Cracow 2003, p. 63.

swap of roles of the main characters – Doctor Breuer, a specialist treating hysteria, makes an offer of cooperation to the Philosopher: “(...) I act as physician to your body. I will concentrate only on your physical symptoms (...). And you, in return, will act as physician to my mind, my spirit. (...) I do not ask you to teach me (philosophy – M.P.), but to *heal me*” (p. 138). Yalom’s great liking for philosophy gives the work a general characteristic of the art of the love of wisdom. The author manages to focus the reader’s attention on the primary function of philosophy, which is an attempt to answer the question about the reasons for the ailments of the spirit, the mind and the material body burdened with various desires.

When Nietzsche Wept abounds in the Philosopher’s ideas, often quoted verbatim, composed integrally into the structure of the novel in a way that leaves no doubt as to the author’s literary and philosophical competence.

Although at the end of this reading adventure the author “disappoints” the reader informing him dutifully that the main characters never met, taking into consideration the themes, the magnificent style and compelling composition, the book may be treated as a book for everyone... but not for anybody.