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Philosophy of Encounter

A CASE STUDY

What is man that Thou art
mindful of him?

Ps 8:4

What is above all needed is
to let the meaning choose
the word, and not the other
way about.

G. Orwell

All actual life is encounter.

M. Buber

Introduction

This paper may have just as well been entitled “Philosophy of Encounter and Dialogue,” for it is the experience of encounter and dialogue that interests me most here. Philosophy of encounter of course refers to the ideas propounded by such philosophers as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Józef Tischner, who were concerned with the importance of interpersonal relationships and their phenomenological description and analysis; dialogue and encounter are cognate terms, so I shall refer to them alternately. At the same time, however, dialogue

suggests interpersonal verbal communication; such is its nature, but encounter—as it is understood here—does not have to be verbal.

In this text, however, I do not intend to provide an analysis of the philosophical positions taken by the aforementioned intellectuals. Rather, I would like to present, on the basis of a literary work, the dynamic character of the human encounter against the backdrop of some philosophies of encounter, notably Martin Buber's. The novelty of my endeavour is that the case study in this article is a short story I found in a book some time ago. The book must have been unfairly treated by someone who did not love books. Most of its pages had been torn out, and I could not even find the author of the story. Despite this, or perhaps precisely because anonymous works stimulate our imagination all the more, I realised that the story could be used as a case study for a more theoretical analysis.

We do not know who the main heroes are; in fact there are no names there at all. And the story seems unfinished. The reader can only imagine what may have happened later. Or, perhaps, the author thought the encounter was central to his or her story, and to be continued by whatever the reader can imagine. Admittedly, the action takes place in specific geographical locations, such as the Dunajec river and the Tatra mountains, which are actual places in southern Poland. This is to emphasise that our human drama invariably takes place in specific circumstances, but our reactions to them are always individual. The fact that no human names appear in the story can be interpreted as an attempt to show a universal situation that can happen to anyone, rather than an analysis of what has happened in the lives of specific individuals. Whatever is concrete and verbally communicable emerges later in the process of untangling and developing relationships.

I think there are three basic groups of readers; there may be more, but these three seem to me dominant. Group one includes those who allow the author to take them by the hand and guide them through his world. They are open to exploration, they are on tenterhooks waiting for the plot to develop further, with all their

senses tensed and agitated, and, like children, they are not afraid to look, touch, and smell. They are enjoying this tour that the author has organised for them. The second group includes those who approach what they read with theoretical detachment. They look out for the writer's tricks and are prepared to define his techniques. They understand and can explain metaphors and similes. In addition, they can appreciate the writer's talent for handling form and content in creating the right atmosphere, tension and drama. In the third group we shall find those self-proclaimed detectives and gossip columnists who will always look at the author with suspicion, as if to ask: "did you report this to the police?" because in the story the main character is shot. These are the ones who are always ready to see the speck in their neighbour's eye, but fail to see the beam in their own and look at the author with suspicion.

I love readers in groups one and two, and reject those in group three. I could only reassure them with the familiar remark: "any resemblance to persons and events is unintentional and accidental," but they would not believe me anyway. We could also repeat after Nabokov that all great novels are great fairy tales; thus encouraging us to approach a written literary text in the way we treat fairy tales. These readers from group three may even believe us for a while, but because the author has mentioned a real place, they will return to their old habits.

I must now leave the problems with groups one, two and three as they do not concern my purpose. Rather, I would like to draw the reader's attention to my original plan, which is to use the story as a starting point for my literary-philosophical analysis of human encounter. The first stage is loneliness and anonymity, for the two protagonists, although they know each other, have not yet met in a particular way; the second stage is their encounter and the beginning of an interpersonal relationship; the third stage is behind what is not said in the text, and I refer the reader to hope and expectation. Let us begin first with the story.

The Story

A NIGHT TRIP

How beautiful they were, how firm they stood,
Flecking the starry sky like woven pearl!

P.B. Shelley

The door burst open and the crowds poured into the inner courtyard. It was paved with flat stones. People gathered and dispersed throughout the space. Some gathered in small groups, having lively discussions. The hustle and bustle of conversations blended together and merged into a noise that was difficult to distinguish. Someone called out, waving his hand.

He stood to the side and pressed his back against the wooden door. His eyes nervously scanned the crowd, but he didn't spot her.

'Are you going home?' asked a friend passing by.

'No, not yet...'

He looked around, but in vain. Then he gave up and began to walk briskly through the space between the door and the gate, where groups of people were crowding on their way out, and found himself on the road that wound down the hillside through the village. The moon was creeping lazily across the sky, shining ever brighter. Venus shone between the feathery clouds. The stars, barely awake, opened their sleepy eyes. Their pupils shone with silver dots. Down below, the Dunajec river glistened.

The silhouettes of the people walking were black against the darkening sky. He sped up his stride, avoiding those walking in front of him. And then he saw her. She was walking with her arms crossed over her chest in a group of four girls, nodding. He felt a slight twinge in the region of his heart.

He walked over and gently touched her left shoulder. She turned her head, laughing. His face was visible in the faint light of a roadside lantern.

'Are you going home?' he asked.

‘Yes...’ she replied, somewhat surprised.

‘But do you really have to go back now?’ he asked, trying to be witty.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well, because I wanted to show you something ...’ he said, looking straight into her eyes, which now looked like dark spots against her face.

‘Definitely now?’

‘Only now, and even absolutely now. Later it will be too late’.

She nodded that she understood. They moved on together with the others. At one point the fence that stretched along the road disappeared and a black hump of hard-surfaced path appeared on the left, and climbed steeply up the slope. He grabbed her by the shoulders and steered her towards the darkness. She obediently submitted to his gesture. In the dark she stumbled over a stone. Immediately, their hands, like magnets with opposite poles, found each other in the darkness and pressed together.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she asked, more curious than frightened.

‘You’ll see for yourself,’ he replied, squeezing her hand. It was soft and moist.

Along the path, on either side of the slope, was a fence. The rails on the slope glinted silver in the moonlight. In a nearby barn, horses creaked with their harnesses. Occasionally the bleating of sheep sounded.

‘So where are we going?’ she asked.

‘Ahead, into the night ...’

‘You’ve got ideas!’

‘Anyway, does it matter where a man goes, as long as he goes with someone he wants to go with?’ he asked, probably speaking more to himself than to her. She remained silent.

They walked, panting slightly, up the moonlit hill.

‘It’s here,’ he whispered.

They turned around. The moon hung over the valley casting its milky light. Down below, the village was settling down to sleep.

Windows glittered in the houses nestled between the hillsides. Here and there the barking of dogs broke the silence. The warm evening wind chased across the fields, combed the groves, and flew over the meadows, raising invisible grass dust into the air. It blew in cascades of scents from the farmsteads: hay, freshly cut grass, and burnt wood. It boiled and stirred it all up, then ran into them in a rush and mussed their faces. It stopped at her locks and began to tug at them.

She closed her eyes and let the wind play with her hair. A smile touched the corners of her lips and froze. He looked sideways at her, at her brightened face. In the distance, the massive ridges of the Tatra Mountains loomed. Somewhere there lurked ominous rocks and tarry caverns. She breathed in the mountain air quietly, fearlessly, gently and softly. He moved his head to her face and kissed her eyelids. She tilted her head and pressed her forehead to his cheek.

‘Thank you for bringing me here,’ she whispered. ‘I thought this evening would go by as usual, like all the previous ones, but it has just become amazing’.

Then she straightened up, looking ahead:

‘What a pity that a moment like this can’t last forever’, she sighed.

‘Unfortunately, it can’t be extended indefinitely, but we can always remember it, just...’—he hesitated—‘would you like to remember it with me?’

‘You’re so intelligent’, she said, still looking ahead, ‘and yet don’t you know that a woman usually turns down an offer to see anything, especially at night, with a man she wouldn’t like to remember it with?’

‘Of course’, he said and smiled.

Then they walked briskly down the hill. He wanted to jump like a child. As they moved away, the moon lengthened their shadows. Eventually they disappeared, swallowed up by darkness.

Anonymity

Loneliness is not a natural human condition. As Aristotle rightly pointed out, we are social by nature, so we naturally form interpersonal bonds with others. Those who choose solitude for religious reasons are not some kind of weird hermits who loathe human relationships because, though alienated from others, they still have a very intimate relationship with God. Otherwise, they would not be able to remain alone. Of course, there are other people who have chosen to remain alone. In general, we are born to live in communities, but this form of living with others can vary. Complete loneliness carries something devilish and is accentuated by hatred of others. Professor Woland, the *porte parole* of the devil in Bulgakov's novel, when asked by Berlioz: "Did you come alone or with your wife?" replies "Alone, alone, I'm always alone."¹

A dozen years ago, the Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze made a fascinating film about totalitarian power. The main character was Varlam Aravidze. Abuladze tried to capture the essence of totalitarianism not as a specific exemplification, but as a universal phenomenon. Aravidze is thus a personification of Nero, Caligula, Stalin, Hitler; when his soldiers arrive at the flat of one of the residents on a mission to arrest him, they are dressed in the uniforms of Roman legionaries. Most interesting, however, is the meaning of the name itself—Aravidze. In Georgian it means "son of no one." Here we have another attribute of authoritarian power, namely total solitude. Those who aspire to power are unable to make friends, unable to form any bonds with other people. They shy away from relationships. Relationships make us equal to others, and those who place themselves above other people cannot be equal to them. Loneliness and anonymity go hand in hand. Aravidze, who is the ideal type of autocrat, trusts no one. This is a situation typical of all totalitarian systems, namely mistrust, and this poisonous mood of mistrust is omnipresent.

¹ Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, 43.

The first scene in the short story opens with the experience of anonymity. We can assume that the protagonist—for the purposes of our analysis (because he is anonymous)² let us call him Robert—knows the people around him. At the same time, he has not established a close relationship with anyone in the group. He resembles the Little Prince from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s classic book, an allegory of the human condition. I am thinking in particular of the scene in which the Little Prince looks at the garden of roses and bursts into tears because all the roses are the same. The worst part is that they resemble his rose, while she claimed to be unique. He feels deceived. Indeed, when the Little Prince looked in this, shall we say, generic fashion—that is, he concentrated on the outward appearance—his rose was in no way different from other roses. It is only when he learned to look rightly “with the heart”³ that he discovers the unique character of his rose. In other words, one should not look at someone in a generic manner as a mere representative of their genre.

Robert is looking forward to a special and unique encounter, as he looks around. Looking around signifies an urgent search, an expectation of a fulfilment that has not yet occurred. It is a stage of expectation and hope, an anticipation of a future that has not yet arrived. Robert can, and of course does, imagine his future, but imagining is not realising. In imagining, the anticipated future takes on shapes that we already know; in imagining, we simply extrapolate a known reality and project it into an unknown future.

The Moment of Encounter

A true encounter comes down to creating an intimate atmosphere, to breaking down the opposites of heat and cold, light and

² Anonymity is intentional here. Apparently the author wanted to make this short story a universal narration about an encounter.

³ Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, 70.

dark, far and near, danger and safety, ultimately between promise and fulfilment. It is not a matter of sweeping one's gaze over an anonymous crowd, but of finding a person, like the ancient Diogenes, who lit a lantern in broad daylight and went seeking an honest man, even though crowds surrounded him.

When Robert spots Ann (this is the suggested name of the female protagonist), he is pulled out of anonymity and called into an interpersonal relationship. Surrounded by the crowd, Ann becomes his figure, as in Gestalt psychology: a dynamic relationship between figure and ground, where Ann is his figure and the others are the ground. Many people surround Robert, but only to Ann is he ready to say at that moment: she is the one, the opening moment of a potentially intriguing and dynamic relationship. He then approaches her, pushed by the hope of establishing a relationship, and gently touches her shoulder. This is the first time Ann can reject the offer or, worse, use irony. Irony implies indifference and disregard for the other person's values. Irony negates them. We shall return to the question of irony.

His touch is delicate because it symbolises an intrusion into someone's territory, and the intruder does not know whether he will be accepted or not. For St. Thomas Aquinas, the sense of touch is the most powerful because it manifests an intimate relationship; it is physical contact and direct experience. Touch is particularly personal because it enters the intimate sphere of the other person.

Ann could have declined his offer or been inquisitive, demanding the exact purpose of the proposal, i.e. introducing rationalisation. Or she could have begun to calculate the risks of accepting it. In either case, she would have destroyed the tension of mystery. Instead, she follows Robert, not knowing where they were going or the purpose of this unexpected journey. She follows him in confidence. In the darkness, she grasps his hand. Locked in the unknown darkness, they trust each other. She trusts that wherever they were going, it will end well; he trusts that she will not laugh at his fascination. The view he wants to show her is dear to him, so he wants to share it with her. He risks much more than

she, because being ridiculed by someone we hold close to our hearts is worse than physical pain. And it takes much longer to heal, if it ever does.

There is another danger that needs to be mentioned. Ann may have pitied Robert by trying to feign fascination because she did not want to hurt him. Unfortunately, pity is a very precarious foundation for any relationship. It can never last long, let alone survive moments of trial; it can only last as long as there is something to pity, as long as one feels superior to the other person. In other words, pity is an emotion associated with pride. When we pity someone, we look down on them. We naturally elevate ourselves, even if we do not realise it. If, in pity, we are driven by emotion, or even overwhelmed by it, truth is not our point of reference; rather, we are influenced by emotion, unable, for example, to maintain a critical distance from someone's situation. Consequently, pity can lead us astray when we sacrifice certain objective values for the sake of pleasing the person we pity. Certainly Robert does not want to be pitied.

W.H. Auden goes even further, saying that,

[behind] pity for another lies self-pity, and behind self-pity lies cruelty to feel compassion for someone is to make oneself their equal; to pity them is to regard oneself as their superior and from that eminence the step to the torture chamber and the corrective labour camp is shorter than one thinks.⁴

We tend to confuse pity with charity because the outward manifestation can blur the real cause of our behaviour. Victor de Pange notes pointedly:

there is a gradation difficult to define between pity [...] and charity [...]. Charity is a virtue that does not demand an emotion. It is a fact of loving one's neighbour like oneself for the love of God. Charity is

⁴ Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 94.

then active, it is creative. [Pity] is affective. It is a sentiment that is tested by suffering at the same time when our neighbour suffers. One could say about this passive state that it is charity without god. [Pity] does not have any moral value [...]. We are already very close to a pity that is a defence reaction before another's suffering. Thus pity is a malaise of sensibility that cannot bear the view of the suffering.⁵

Pity takes on illusory appearances, so that it only outwardly resembles something it is not:

perhaps a form of love, but not a form of which anyone wishes to be the object. Charity is not puffed up, but he who is addicted to pitying others may be exalting himself above them.⁶

Of course, shared fascination with the view is not the end of their story, but its beginning. They need to find themselves together in what arouses (or not) their tacit understanding in order to prepare for the trials of life. Silence precedes verbal communication. As Saint-Exupéry noted in his superb book:

And that it is by dint of burdens borne and drudgery that love is quickened.⁷

Robert is not an idealist, or at least there is no indication that he is. He knows that life also consists of "burdens and drudgery," but what chance of lasting has a relationship between two people who do not share moments of quiet fascination, who cannot endure silence together? Robert realises that a lasting relationship cannot be built on a foundation of material possessions or volatile emotions alone. Mutual and silent fascination is more

⁵ de Pange, *Graham Greene*, 63.

⁶ O'Donnell, *Maria Cross*, 63.

⁷ Saint-Exupéry, *The Wisdom of the Sands*, 20.

than mere emotion and something other than possession; it is something intimate that resonates with what is deepest, intangible and therefore not susceptible to loss.

Watching the same landscape in silence seems to be the most powerful form of conversation, an inner conversation without words spoken. Ann could have recoiled from Robert's idea and resorted to irony, the worst way of destroying human relationships, of rejecting someone's sincere intention. Saint-Exupéry notes that he hates irony, "which is not a man's weapon, but the dolt's."⁸ Irony mocks silence because it cannot bear it; in general, it feels uncomfortable in any serious situation. It is usually awkward among strangers, so they kill it with meaningless words. Silence suits friends: where there is silence, there is no room for irony. What we can admire together in silence, joined by silent meditation, actually helps us to have—although it sounds paradoxical—the most friendly and amusing conversation. Robert and Ann share the same value without any verbal communication.

Note that when the moment comes for Robert to inform Ann of the end of their trip, he whispers the words "it's here." This gentle remark, in keeping with what the word "whisper" usually implies, is nevertheless imbued with solemnity and tension and, above all, personal power; the whisper is reminiscent of Robert's earlier touching of the girl. What is an end for him must be an end for her; she cannot ask "for more." If she expected to see "more," it would mean that his fascination did not interest her. This is the climax. Asking for more or anything else would have destroyed Robert's expectation. He must have been at the top of this hill before, admiring the nocturnal landscape, but he was clearly not satisfied with his solitary experience; he wanted to share it with a person he was fond of. One senses anticipation and anxiety in his quiet voice; he does not know how she will react. He certainly hopes that she will react with the same fascination with which he reacted earlier. Obviously it is not possible to measure the two

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

reactions, but as long as the object is the same, there are certain symptoms that can manifest participation.

It is not difficult, for instance, to imagine that even such an innocent word as “what?”—as a response to his “it’s here”—could spoil the effect. Because if the other person asks me the reason for my personal fascination, expressed with the question “what?” while I feel it does not require an explanation, I already know that this is not the right person with whom to share it. This is why we can sense the tension in Robert’s whisper: because he is not sure of her reaction, he just hopes that she will meet his expectations. Such is the dynamic of an exchange without the mediation of words between individuals. The girl could grumble and complain that she is tired after such an exhausting walk, or go on to insist on some other, “more serious” reasons why he brought her there. All similar reactions would undoubtedly spoil the relationship, at least at this stage, as we can imagine a further scenario. Perhaps later they could have met under different circumstances and started the relationship anew. Ann could, if she cared, have initiated a completely different event.

Meanwhile, Robert expects empathy. Standing together on a hill illuminated by moonlight symbolises empathy, or the sharing of mutual aesthetic experience. For the German phenomenologist Edith Stein, empathy was “a special form of cognition,”⁹ a form that results in a special kind of intuition. Empathy cannot be evoked if it is not there. For Robert, it is a question of whether they could endure alone without words, immersed in the same admiration for the view.

The first condition for a genuine encounter, according to Kant’s categorical imperative, is that the other person does not treat me as a means to his ends. We do not know this immediately. We can learn it gradually in the course of interpersonal experience. Therefore, in the prologue to Buber’s book *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann writes:

⁹ Baseheart, *Person in the World*, 31.

A genuine encounter can be quite exhausting, even when it is exhilarating, and I do not always want to give myself.¹⁰

The meeting on the hill is indeed exhilarating, but because of the dynamics of expectations and the unknown results of their fulfilment it is also, shall we say, emotionally exhausting. Initially, there is naturally a discrepancy between two people. Ann is curious about what she will see, Robert may also be looking forward to her reaction to his fascination. Such a reaction can also be utilitarian, when someone expects something tangible for what they have given, although we have every reason to suspect that in this case Robert is not just waiting for her to confirm his experience. On the other hand, however, there are situations of such, shall we say, objectification, which in this case could mean that Robert simply treats the girl as someone who would only confirm his excitement for the night.

Let us imagine that Robert expects the girl to be as fascinated as he is. Then he may not allow her the freedom, if not of rejection or boredom, then at least of disappointment. Assuming there is freedom in the proposal, there is also room for rejection. This is the most difficult element in any interpersonal relationship: to find the balance between closeness and distance, too long for closeness and to allow distance or even departure at the same time. In other words, to allow the other person to be free, regardless of our personal expectations.

We can imagine Robert contemplating this night trip for a long time. Let us add: contemplating and imagining this unique encounter. Martin Buber writes:

The deed involves a sacrifice and a risk. [...] The risk: the basic word can only be spoken with one's whole being; whoever commits himself may not hold back part of himself; and the work does not permit me, as a tree or man might, to seek relaxation in the It-

¹⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 17.

world; it is imperious: if I do not serve it properly, it breaks or it breaks me. The form that confronts me I cannot experience nor describe; I can only actualize it.¹¹

It is easy for the imagination to move forward, as it usually does, by visualising something that has not yet been realised. Therefore, it is important to curb this forward momentum and let reality unfold, unless we want to end up in some illusory idealisation. Hope needs patience, and patience is strengthened by hope.

In a real relationship, one should not rush. Rather, one should walk hand in hand with the other, or even a little behind. This is difficult because our vivid imagination naturally tends to precede actions with words. Unfortunately, this is often akin to sending a letter to a friend at an address where he does not yet live. He may have plans to move and settle there, but not now and we do not know if he ever will. We should let reality unfold. We should brave the unknown, rather than take the other person for granted.

Hope agrees to take risks and patience takes them. Indeed, Robert takes a risk and only Ann can make that risk a reality. Therefore, responding to his fascination, Ann freely enters his spiritual life. She agrees to participate in it. As Bukowski notes,

I hope that my openness will be reciprocated on a basis of personal equality.¹²

Robert indeed hopes that his own person will not be taken advantage of by the girl, but that she will respond in freedom. He knows he should not even dream in the slightest degree of entrapping her. A genuine encounter must not infringe on the other per-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60–61.

¹² Bukowski, *Zarys filozofii spotkania* [An outline of the philosophy of encounter], 252. All Polish excerpts from Bukowski's book are in my translation.

son's freedom, no matter how much one person wants to carry out his or her plans. The key verb that comes to mind here is the word *use*. Robert does not want to use Ann as a passive witness to his nocturnal raptures; nor does Ann want to be used by the boy. Should they wish to do so, it would mean using the other person as a means to an end.¹³ If that were their expectation, the relationship would end at the end of the trip. There would be no need to continue it.

Let us read Wojtyła, who makes clear the point that freely sharing is a fundamental condition for participation:

Obviously, I may want another person to desire the same good which I myself desire. Obviously, the other must know this end of mine, recognize it as a good, and adopt it. If this happens, a special bond is established between me and this other person: the bond of a common good and of a common aim. This special bond does not mean merely that we both seek a common good, it also unites the persons involved internally, and so constitutes the essential core round which any love must grow. In any case, love between two people is quite unthinkable without some common good to bind them together. This good is the end which both these persons choose.¹⁴

And the condition for love is a genuine encounter.

Departure—Being Together

As we can see from the quote above, the important requirements of a real encounter in our story are met. Ann voluntarily decides to take part in the trip, and they both participate in the same experience, which becomes a common good that could bind them

¹³ See Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 25. Such an attitude certainly contradicts the second formulation of the Kantian categorical imperative.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

together, or at least start a more lasting relationship. And this is something they both choose. The girl's last words confirm her free choice.

The story ends in fulfilment. They share their fascination and respond to it in their individual way. Ann does not say much. This aesthetic moment needs little explanation. She has not only shared, but deeply responded to Robert's fascination. Their meeting on the hill is filled with gestures and silence rather than conversation. One could even say that it is a very spiritual moment. As we know, many important events in the Bible take place on mountain tops. Climbing a mountain symbolises departure and isolation from disturbance. We climb a mountain to overcome our weaknesses, to test our endurance and to get a wider view, to feel free, surrounded by vast spaces. We climb a mountain with someone close to us to be on our side, to share secrets, to be together without witnesses. This is how God met with his people; Moses left the Israelites and went up the mountain to receive the most important message—the Decalogue. Robert is not a naïve idealist; nevertheless, at the beginning of his more lasting relationship, he would like to know if the other person is willing to share and respect his secret: something personal and deep that he would not want to show to anyone else, or at least would not be interested in knowing someone else's opinion.

The moment when Robert asks Ann if she would like to remember that evening with him is indeed very Platonic in the sense that the great philosopher of antiquity considered memory to be the basis of our knowledge. The contemplation of the beauty they experienced can be their bond, to which they can return in memory. Recalling something in memory in this case is not just an aesthetic moment, which in itself is fleeting and short-lived. It is a personal moment of being together and sharing the same experience; it is like a mutual understanding that evades words. As such, this experience is close in its meaning to Kierkegaard's notion of repetition.

We should add another point. Robert asks Ann about her memory, which means that he approves of history, that he sees

life as a meaningful whole made up of interrelated sequences. He is not an aesthete for whom this spontaneous moment of mutual admiration would suffice. He does not want, as Kierkegaard would put it, to “live poetically.”¹⁵ Living poetically would be the ironic response of the aesthete because irony sings one song: the song of non-involvement. For irony, reality is just a game with self-imposed rules, but no responsibility. There is nothing serious about it. The question of memory is tantamount to the question of shared history; and what is shared history but reality?

The question of repetition is extremely important, because they do not know whether, surrounded by the novelties of the day that beg for their attention, they will be able to return to something lasting and stable that unites them. We can imagine them in their old age, sitting together and reminiscing: “remember that evening on the hill?” This reminiscence can also become an emotional moment, a personal evocation even of impressions from that time. Let us emphasise that it is a personal recollection and not just a sentimental one, because some time has passed, with the growing emotional baggage of the various moments of trials and conflicts that the passage of time usually brings, and yet they have managed to preserve that original admiration.

Another important thing about this encounter that makes it unique is its personal nature. There is a huge difference between the way a scientist observes the contours of the earth or a botanist observes rare species. As Saint-Exupéry noted, scientists aim to draw general conclusions, whereas individual people are interested in “details [...] no geographer had been concerned to explore [...] that brook nourishing a mere score or two of flowers [...]”¹⁶ Mapmakers are concerned with the generic and repetitive, while individual people bring out the special and unique in their personal and existential experience. Robert and Ann’s approach to

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 280.

¹⁶ Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.264850/2015.264850.Wind-Sand_djvu.txt.

what they see is entirely personal, as it is only through this experience that they can create the interpersonal bonds already mentioned.

Robert does not want to build his relationship with Ann on mere emotional excitement, but on love, which—as Wojtyła rightly pointed out—precludes “the use of one person by another [...]” and “is conditioned by the common attitude of people towards the same good, which they choose as their aim, and to which they subordinate.”¹⁷ However, emotional experience is important because it is a prelude to a deeper relationship and transcends verbal communication. Human beings consist of an intellectual sphere and an affective sphere. Personal experience is never complete if it ignores one of these.

These emotional-affective overtones influence future events. To quote Wojtyła again,

these emotions or sentiments usually have some influence in determining the objective structure of people’s actions.¹⁸

Let us note that Wojtyła writes of “some influence,” meaning that however beautiful an experience may be, it only potentially fosters the establishment of interpersonal relationships. It is impossible to imagine such a relationship solely as the result of an objectively planned endeavour; that would be somewhat inhuman. At the same time, we know very well that two people cannot completely rely only on what they have admired together, but must create a shared reality by tapping into their personal resources: patience, mutual understanding, perseverance. As Buber put it superbly:

Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I

¹⁷ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur.¹⁹

There is no “purpose,” “no greed and no anticipation,” they are both immersed in a common experience. We can call it participation which is an important term for a personal relationship which respects freedom. Ann and Robert can be together and yet remain different. They allow love to occur, as Buber put it, for as “feelings dwell in man, [...] man dwells in his love.”²⁰ Robert hopes to establish a relationship with Ann; he does not want to turn her I into thinghood, which happens when we intend to use someone. He wants to start a new world, for—as Buber notes—“In the beginning is the relation.”²¹ Dwelling implies a permanent existence, a rootedness, an ontology; it is not a fleeting emotional moment.

The boy’s expectation expresses our universal longing for a relationship. This longing is innate in us from the earliest stage of our existence.²² Robert is on tenterhooks to know whether Ann will react in a similar manner. The point is not to evaluate his fascination, for that would mean a slavish attitude, and there is no slavery in love, but to respond in like mode. He would not accept any patronizing reaction, and such is easy to detect. Buber describes this in his poetic language writing that,

the longing for relation is primary, the cupped hand into which the being that confronts us nestles; and the relation to that, which is a wordless anticipation of saying You, comes second.²³

¹⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 62–63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1996, 66.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 78.

It follows that the nocturnal landscape can be likened to a cupped hand into which the girl should nestle; it is a wordless invitation to his world. Relation is primary, it is a priori, “*the innate You*,” as Buber calls it, which “is realized in the You we encounter [...]”²⁴ And we wish this drive for contact to be reciprocal. It is a chance and a danger at the same time, for this drive for contact can be frustrated. If “man becomes an I through You,”²⁵ Robert wants to become an I through Ann. This craving has nothing instrumental in it because only through a free response can a You create an I. There is a substantial tension between an I and a You. Only I is subject to coordination, but You eludes it. I cannot place the You within a system of coordinates—that is, define it precisely—or determine its reactions. Indeed it is wonderful that as elusive as the You is, it is fundamental for the co-creation of the I. You cannot be so constant and solid as a material point of reference.

The observable world has its coordinates, so that each particle can be described as present in a spatial-temporal place. The illusion of this situation consists in the fact that although the human being can also be described in a similar manner, it is only its physical aspect that is thus rendered. The miracle of encounter considerably exceeds physical description. Ann and Robert are set against the background of dark rocks, the starry sky, the fragrance of meadows and the like. None of these elements determines the outcome of their encounter, although, admittedly, they establish the setting. Buber define the difference between the “It-world” and the “You-world” as follows:

The It-world hangs together in space and time. The You-world does not hang together in space and time.²⁶

Man is a being that lives in the spirit, and his “power to relate” alone makes him able to do that. We can say that relationship is

²⁴ Ibid., 78.

²⁵ Ibid., 80.

²⁶ Ibid., 84.

co-equal to spirit, for—as Buber notes—the spirit is “between I and You.”²⁷ Therefore, observing steep crevasses and slippery slopes is not likely to create a relationship; they all belong to the It-world. At the same time, the essence of the spirit is silence, so Robert sees Ann’s silent fascination for the first time, and this is what makes him happy. His anticipation cannot be objectified. He waits in silence. As Buber put it beautifully:

Only silence toward the You, the silence of all tongues, the taciturn waiting in the unformed, undifferentiated, prelinguistic word leaves the You free and stands together with it in reserve where the spirit does not manifest itself but is. All response binds the You into the It-world.²⁸

Silence is more important than words because words do not always manifest internal truth, and are always a mere approximation of what there is to say. Most often, we try to show sympathy, whether we like it or not, or we anticipate what the other person wants to tell us. Therefore, there is a danger of falsity, even if it is not intended. This is why Robert says “it’s here” and not “do you like it?” He does not want her to be nice to him. Ann’s silence is “louder” and more convincing than her words, and that is enough for him.

Robert does not want to utilize Ann for his own fascination, nor does he wish her to make some false declarations. This is the paradox of his drama. He hopes for her empathy, but it cannot be merely verbal. Indeed, he wants to leave the You free. He does not need her to strengthen his fascination, for that would be utilization. He is satisfied with fascination on his own; he only wonders whether they could have an encounter within the niche of some fundamental experience. Naming the reality between the I and the You would push the You into an It-world.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Robert has brought Ann to the place of his fascination, but he does not wish to establish his relationship on a mere feeling. Buber renders it perfectly while discussing the difference between the It-district (institutions) and the I-district (feelings). He writes:

True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another. [...] A living reciprocal relationship includes feelings but is not derived from them. A community is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, but the builder is the living, active center.²⁹

This quote precisely visualises what has happened in the story. The landscape is their centre of reciprocal fascination. As I have already noted, Robert wants to check whether Ann is present to him in his experience; he does not want to use her for his enjoyment. He would immediately find out if she were just trying to fake sympathy so as not to hurt him. Buber writes about marriage that it can never be renewed except by that which is always the source of all true marriage: that two human beings reveal the You to one another. It is of this that the You that is I for neither of them builds a marriage. This is the metaphysical and metaphysical fact of love which is merely accompanied by feelings of love [...] every relationship in which one is not at all present to the other, but each uses the other only for self-enjoyment—what would remain?³⁰

They wish to have an encounter around the core of love. This is the building in which they yearn to dwell, for—as Saint-Exupery put it superbly—

²⁹ Ibid., 94.

³⁰ Ibid., 95.

I am he who dwells [...], and life's meaning changes for them with the meaning of the home. And that roads, barley-fields and hillsides look different to a man according as they belong, or do not belong, to a domain.³¹

Here we go back again to the question of dwelling. As Robert and Ann pass along the winding road up the hill, they both hear the voice of homes, of those who dwell in their houses, their citadels. Most obviously those people are hardly aware of the aesthetic beauty of the nocturnal surroundings. Peace can only be given by “the stillness of full granaries, of sleeping flocks, of folded linen, of the perfected thing [...]”³² They hear this stillness, this peace encompassed by the walls of eternal customs, by the solidity of faithfulness. Such is the essence of human freedom: it feels at home within the confines of limitations. It “is by dint of burdens borne and drudgery that love is quickened.”³³ The same is true of freedom.

It is interesting that one short evening can be the beginning of a more permanent relationship. Robert manages to tease out Ann's responsive character to beauty. Is it not interesting that while they are walking up the path, Robert does not ask any practical questions? The echoes of daily chores and family lives seem of secondary importance. The primary importance is given to wordless fascination on the hill. This is supposed to be the beginning of other values. In other words, we are ready to accept what living together entails, assuming we can share something unnamed and profound, something that bears fruit in the form of the I-You relationship. We can assume that, for example, implicit encounter precedes explicit encounter. What is untold precedes what can be described in terms of daily duties. Why is this prelinguistic encounter so important? The only answer that comes to my mind right now is that it is a mystery, to be precise,

³¹ Saint-Exupéry, *The Wisdom of the Sands*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

the central mystery of the human being. Even if in communication the most important thing is assertion, as Feibleman noted, it “is not necessarily a matter of words,”³⁴ and yet significant communication can take place at this non-verbal level. The conclusion suggests itself. In a relationship, we begin with what is incommunicable in order to arrive at what is communicable. We begin with silent participation in order to fathom any grounds for communication. We touch something which resides deep down in the recesses of our innermost psyche, and we find it as our treasure. Now, we wish to show it to someone with whom we would like to have an encounter. A reciprocal fascination is only a preliminary stage for a relationship. I think that, following Buber, this is what we may call “starting from the spirit.”³⁵ The spirit eludes calculation or profit; it is beyond any practical estimation. Therefore, up there on top of the hill, Robert and Ann both participate in a spiritual phenomenon. This presence of the spirit from which

significance and joy can flow into all work, and reverence and the strength to sacrifice into all possession, not to the brim but *quantum satis*—and that all that is worked and possessed, though it remains attached to the It-world, can nevertheless be transfigured to the point where it confronts us and represents the You.³⁶

The It-world is the world in which the principle of causality holds sway. It is the world of science, whereas the world of the spirit is “the world of relation.”³⁷ In the world of the spirit, in the world of relation, persons can make decisions freely, for they are not trammelled by the cause-effect relationship, e.g. I can give you only as much as you have given me. When Robert learns about Ann’s positive response, he is born anew in a relationship.

³⁴ Feibleman, *How to Write like Tolstoy*, 130.

³⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

We can say that Robert and Ann have become a part of the universal cosmic, for they fulfil the calling of the human world whose culture must be “centered in a living and continually renewed relational process,” or else it freezes into the It-world and “grows into an oppressive and crushing doom.”³⁸ Therefore, it is out of his free decision that Robert invites Ann on that trip, and it is out of her free decision that he expects her approval.

Buber holds that freedom is related to fate and they both “constitute meaning.”³⁹ Caprice and doom, writes Buber metaphorically, are “living next door and avoiding each other, without connection and friction, at home in meaninglessness,”⁴⁰ for when freedom is deprived of its consequences it is empty. But freedom is not empty, so as such it is filled with human decisions, and such decisions determine the state of the world. In other words they change its configuration. Buber says:

Free is the man that wills without caprice.⁴¹

Let it be noted that this sentence sounds very Kantian. Man enters a variety of configurations. In the beginning all outcomes are plausible; this configuration waits for his or her decisions and his or her determination to follow what he or she has willed. Robert must realize that his encounter with Ann is a gift, not a reward for his efforts to enchant her.⁴²

By his decision, Robert actualizes one configuration of many. The capricious man has no encounters, for a real encounter terminates or blocks other options. Buber’s thinking is parallel to Kierkegaard’s. The Danish philosopher, as we know, imagined three stages of human development: aesthetic, ethical, and reli-

³⁸ Ibid., 103.

³⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bukowski, *Zarys filozofii spotkania* [An outline of the philosophy of encounter], 246.

gious. The aesthetic stage is the stage at which Don Juan lived. In Kierkegaard's terms Don Juan is the epitome of an aesthetic being, whereas in Buber's terms he is capricious.

Robert's encounter is in earnest. He is determined to face his destiny. Every human with his or her decision becomes the creator of a new configuration. The decision imposes a new order on the chaotic configuration. When my I responds to someone's You, I call to life a new encounter. And our world is no longer the same.

The human being is torn between being passive and overactive. He no longer interferes, nor does he merely allow things to happen. He listens to that which grows, to the way of Being in the world, not in order to be carried along by it but rather in order to actualize it in the manner in which it, needing him, wants to be actualized by him—with human spirit and human deed, with human life and human death. He believes, I said; but this implies; he encounters.⁴³

Robert is not capricious, for

[t]he capricious man does not believe and encounter. He does not know association; he only knows the feverish world out there and his feverish desire to use it.⁴⁴

Robert is sensitive, but he is not an aesthete. The meeting on the hill is a precondition of his encounter, but without a wordless experience he cannot proceed. Buber writes:

All actuality is an activity in which I participate without being able to appropriate it. Where there is no participation, there is no actuality. Where there is self-appropriate, there is no actuality. The more directly the You is touched, the more perfect is the participation. The I is actual through its participation in actuality. The more perfect the participation is, the more actual the I becomes.⁴⁵

⁴³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

The human being should be person-oriented, not only ego-oriented; the more person-oriented we are, the more actual we become. Because Ann responds to Robert they share their actuality. We need to be actual; that is, to be responsive and related to others.

The most difficult thing about an encounter is to yearn for it and at the same time to leave the other person his or her freedom of choice. An encounter cannot be enforced or reified, which happens when the other is in whatever ways instrumentalized or utilized for one's own purposes. In other words the other person's You cannot be turned into an It. Buber bases encounter on sacrifice and prayer, and distinguishes it from magic, which focuses on being "effective without entering into any relationship," whereas "sacrifice and prayer [...] say You and listen."⁴⁶ This is a fascinating illustration of a call from a free I to a free You. I would add yet another element of this essential cluster, i.e. hope. Thereby encounters are placed within a triangle: sacrifice, prayer, and hope. It is like listening intently to an answer without any attempt to anticipate what kind of response it will be. From the depth of his triangle Robert listens to Ann.

Conclusion

In this text, we started with a case study. It was supposed to provide evidence as a matter of illustration of a human encounter. Emotions can be elusive, yet at the same time, fleeting as they are, they can initiate a serious relationship. Each person is a mystery in his or her innermost psyche. Some elements are revealed to the world without. These elements can be studied by various sciences. Some might argue that human relations are fragile and transitory, even though they started with a reciprocal fascination. I would answer as follows: firstly, we never know whether an

⁴⁶ Ibid., 131.

encounter was initiated with fascination; secondly, fascination is only a beginning that must be followed up by respective action. This action is based on faithfulness, endurance, and responsibility. Then we need repetition and a return to the moment of the encounter. It must also be stressed here that we have been considering in these pages only the human I-You relationship. Martin Buber alludes also to I-You relationship in the context of the human-God relationship and its simultaneous exclusiveness and inclusiveness.

Love is a risky and unpredictable relation because it cannot exist without freedom. And freedom presupposes consent to a choice that cannot be predetermined, for predetermination would be a contradiction of freedom. Standing in front of the other, we stand before a countenance, a strong theme with Lévinas.

At the same time, we must be aware that full reciprocity does not exist, as Buber warns us. Measure for measure in human relationships is impossible. There is always a certain incompatibility: one or the other person is a few steps ahead and the other has to catch up. In like manner they strive, by aiming to be together, to improve and adjust. And this is quite obvious, for there is no measure to weigh the gift of one person. We know very well that such a gift is of a spiritual nature, and there is no common measure in the realm of what is spiritual. I can give only as much as the other person gives—such a condition would be absurd. In the I-You relationship we are forever doomed to incompleteness. It is like an open set with ever more, freshly added elements. Hence Buber concludes:

Every I-You relationship in a situation defined by the attempt of one partner to act on the other one so as to accomplish some goal depended on a mutuality that is condemned never to become complete.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ibid., 179.

The story on which this paper is based closes without a conclusive ending. We are left with our own guesses as to what might happen in the lives of the characters. It is open to various interpretations, like an invitation for readers to use their imagination.

There are certain elements that destroy a genuine encounter. We have listed them here as the following: rationalisation, pity, and irony. These are attitudes that either look for ultimate causal relations in their chains of reasoning, leaving no room for the unknown and wanting to explain everything, or that belittle the other person, looking down on them in pitying sympathy or hiding behind an ironic mask of inauthenticity. ■

Philosophy of Encounter. A Case Study

SUMMARY

This article is an attempt to analyse the dynamics of encounter on the basis of an anonymous short story. The literary text shows the essential stages of an encounter: anonymity, fascination, the authenticity of experiencing an interpersonal relationship, hope and permanence. Starting from a literary description, the article presents all these elements. They are stages on the way to a lasting encounter. Some of them are only outlined (implied), others show a wordless picture of the emotions connecting individuals. The main philosophical point of reference here is Martin Buber and his philosophy of encounter described in the text *I and Thou*. The text also shows the elements that are destructive to an authentic encounter: irony, pity, mask.

Keywords: irony, pity, relationship, encounter, Buber, Stein, Wojtyła

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