

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND PHILOSOPHY AS LITERATURE

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Abstract: Born in Washington, Irvin David Yalom (1931-) comes from a family of Russian Jews who sought a better future in the American realm. Fascinated by books since childhood, Irvin chose the path of medicine he attended at the George Washington School of Medicine. Refused by 19 of the faculties of medicine he had been applying to, Yalom saw his dream come true. After medical studies, he performed military service for two years at the Tripler General Hospital in Honolulu. But his real aim was to share what fascinated him: psychotherapy. Thus, in 1963, he began to teach at Stanford University this new emerging branch which links medicine and psychology. A new scientific realm, this interdisciplinary border science, had not been exploited in the years before World War II. Although he was a psychiatrist as formation, Yalom incorporated in his literary and scientific writings a strong philosophical footprint. As he alone admitted in an interview, he was deceived by the limitations of theories he had studied in years of medical training: biological psychiatry and psychoanalytic theory. Yalom felt the bond between the two conceptual aspects was philosophy. Confirmation came to him when he read the book of Rollo May Existence (1958), which was a profoundly humanistic, existentialistic approach to psychoanalytic theories crystallized until that moment. Thus, Yalom sensed that, beyond psychiatric pathologies, there is the human condition, that core of experiences that is the common denominator of all of us.

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Irvin David Yalom decides to deepen the whole philosophical approach of the human soul through readings from Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Socrates, Plato, Epicurus, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger. The moments of medical training were sprinkled with financial difficulties that he had overcome by working on a farm, carrying luggage, selling fireworks, teaching chemistry or tennis. Once medical studies began, his sources of income would come within his sphere of interest “extra income was available only from laboratory jobs, selling blood and sperm, and assisting professors with library research. I held a myriad of post-MD consultation jobs at prisons and psychiatric hospitals.”¹ The difficulties encountered did not diminish the ambition of this literary physician but seemed to stimulate his desire to become a professional and a better writer. The ambition of self-improvement was the one that led him on the path of academic, medical and literary achievements. As he confesses, his inspiration is rather oniric and fantastic. Abstemious and tidy nature in everyday life, when it comes to his literature, Yalom turns to reverie and imagination. The fictional source of inspiration has been chiseled through large readings, but also through active discussions with patients because the physician is the upholder of a constructive attitude through which anyone can learn from others, even a doctor from his patients

Yalom has gone even further on the path of existential psychotherapy that focuses on general human experiences, on questions to which all people are trying to find answers. Among the subjects addressed by this sub-branch of psychotherapy we mention those such as individual freedom, assuming responsibility, purpose of life, and death. Starting from the philosophical perspective on the experiences that an individual lives, existential psychotherapy considers depression, anxiety and sentiment of helplessness as merely

¹ Irvin David Yalom, *When Nietzsche Wept*, Harper Perennial, 1992, p 220

manifestations of human becoming. The maturation of the individual requires passing through these stages considered by the new science to be vital in the process of inner evolution. Existential psychotherapy puts in the hands of practitioners and patients tools of both philosophy and psychology to obtain the most useful outcomes so that the individual can attain the latent human potential. The inner healing process that, this science proposes, starts from assuming responsibility for our own deeds and inner freedom to help the individual on the hard way of evolution. The basics of existential psychotherapy were put in the nineteenth century by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. If the first, Kierkegaard, reproached man's lack of action and assumption of his existence, the second - Nietzsche - took over this philosophical approach and went further. Thus, according to Nietzsche, in a world in which science has taken the place of the Creator, man can only be found through the personal and intimate experience of all existential aspects.

Influenced by his predecessors, Yalom sees the human being as grounded in questions he is trying to find answers to. "He seems to know continental philosophy as well as he knows psychotherapy, and he understands that the former can teach us as much about self-healing as the latter."² The stages that consciousness must go through are feeling of isolation, the lack of personal goals and existence purposefulness, individual freedom and fear of death. Yalom analyzes how individuals position themselves on these issues, whether they do it in a constructive and practical way, or choose the path of reducing inner integrity, becoming pathological.

In 1970, Yalom signed his first book, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, which reflects his medical practice on how the psychotherapy group can influence the individual's becoming. Even if the evolution of each is an intimate experience, the psychotherapeutic group can make a constructive contribution to this evolutionary process was the conclusion reached by the author. One book is at the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, *Every Day Gets Little Closer: A Twice-Told Therapy* (1974), was written together with Ginny Elkin, the literary pseudonym of a patient who benefited from psychotherapy to help her overcome anxiety. Addressing consciousness issues from a dual perspective: a physician and a patient in the form of two parallel journals was quite an innovative literary technique. The ordinary audience used to view the psychotherapist as the person who listens without being an interventionist, finds an unusual approach to the doctor-patient relationship in this book. Yalom participates emotionally in the inner life of his patient, Ginny Elkin. Rather, a relationship of partnership, the evolution of two people who, despite the fact that they are placed in two separate camps (of the doctor and the patient), lets cooperation and the influence the two of them have on the each other. The relationship between the two demonstrates the reader that, in fact, we are all alike. Ginny's schizoid personality, the bipolarity she shows during her appointments with her doctor is a state we all experience. We all pass from exaltation to darkness of depression, and even if we recognize it or not, the inner balance is a fragile, sensitive one that vibrates and resonates with the environment in which we live and the experiences that define us as human beings.

After a long literary break, in 1989, Yalom signs another novel, *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*. Structured in the form of ten stories, the novel is a journey into the inner world of the patients that he treated over time. This time also motivations, hopes, aspirations and endeavor of the people the physician came across are scrutinized. What this new piece of literary work brings is the psychiatrist's attempt to find himself in these life stories. The four emotions that each one has to face: the ineluctable character of death, the problem of freedom and responsibility, the feeling of isolation, and the feeling of

² Jeffrey Berman, *Death in the Classroom: Writing about Love and Loss*, State University of New York Press, 2009, p. 17

futility are the main themes here. The psychiatrist proposes a constructive perspective to overcome these limitations, which leads to the triumph of the human being in the struggle with oneself. Human nature, in an attempt to overcome these frustrating experiences, can develop obsessive-compulsive behaviors. The metamorphosis of patients who become aware of the fact that the basis of their unhappiness is their own person is amazing. However, what impresses the reader is that in this patient-doctor relationship, the psychiatrist himself is evolving. Recognizing the power of personal preconceptions, Yalom tries a personal catharsis in order to overcome his own human limitations, his own phobias and obsessions. Ultimately, we find out that the psychotherapist is also a person with his own experiences, which partly overlap ours. Exceeding the distance that traditionally exists between the physician and the patient, Yalom brings closer to the reader the existential doubts that he tries to explain. Explaining, he defines himself. We are witnessing, as lecturers, the emergence of not only the treated but also the treating one. The humanization of the one who should only assist in suffering, his emotional involvement with a transformation of his own consciousness are some of the features of the literature pages that Yalom has exposed to the public.

In 1992 Yalom signed a new novel *When Nietzsche Wept*. The action takes place in Vienna at the end of the 19th century and has as protagonists two prominent figures of medicine: Josef Breuer (1842-1925) Austrian physician and neurophysiologist and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) the neuropsychiatric physician who laid the foundations of psychology psychoanalysis. Breuer becomes obsessed with his patient, Anna O. This is actually the pseudonym of a real patient, Bertha Pappenheim (1859-1936), whose case has been the subject of a study signed by neurophysiologist *Studies on Hysteria*. The book was signed by Breuer and Freud. Breuer arrives to treat the great philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) who suffered a great disappointment in love. Breuer, in his attempt to treat the patient, applies psychoanalysis and reaches, through discussions with him, to treat his patient and to cure himself. The novel is not only a plea for psychoanalysis, the story of a real episode in the history of this science, but also a human approach to two powerful personalities, the inner conflicts through which they pass, the way in which they manage to overcome the psychological impasse but also a fresco of the Viennese society of the moment. Novel of treating a double obsession through conversation, *When Nietzsche Wept*, is a piece of literature that naturally blends psychoanalysis, human nature and soul healing that every individual seeks in this life. At the end of the book we find an interview with the author. Yalom explains his literary becoming by coexistence and mutual fulfillment of the two forms of existence of writing: fiction and specialized texts. The stories that were born in his imagination have made the teaching style of psychoanalysis texts more subdued. The fictional recreation of reality has put its mark on Yalom's scientific style for fantasy could unleash the latent creativity already existent in the soul of the author "My textbooks were vastly improved by my story writing. For example, my group therapy textbook has dozens of short stories about therapy sprinkled throughout the text— some just a few lines or a paragraph long, some up to three pages. Students have often told me they were willing to put up with reading dry theory because they knew that an interesting story would be coming along in a page or two. Conversely, my daily psychotherapeutic work exploring the inner world of my patients vastly aided me in character creation when I turned to more literary pursuits."³

Four years later, in 1996, Yalom returns to the literary scene with yet another novel: *Lying on the Couch*. The protagonists are, as the author has accustomed us, three psychotherapists who have to face their own fears: Seymour who falls into the temptation of a loving relationship with a patient, Marshal Streider who becomes aware of the greed and financial temptations that he faces and Ernest Lash, who is driven by the noble, purely

³ Irvin David Yalom, *When Nietzsche Wept*, Harper Perennial, 1992, p. 218

humanist aspirations in the treatment of his patients. The novel seems to be a testimony of the author about his own anxieties during his meetings with his patients. Asking for total sincerity in disclosing their deepest fears, psychiatrists become the subject of study in this novel. Under the microscope of the author, they find themselves more cowardly and dirty than the patients who come to them to treat themselves.

1999 brings a fictional piece of literary work *Momma and the Meaning of Life*. The author re-uses short-stories as a narrative way. Built out of six stories, the novel is again a story about humanity. If the first four stories are based on real facts and characters, the latter two are purely fictional. Prologue is even autobiographic. The novel is built around the relationship that the author had with his mother, who, shamefully, admits that he did not appreciate enough during her lifetime. After her death, this would be impossible. This is a reminder that we should do things when proper time is, not to postpone because we are not aware when the end comes.

The literary enthusiasm of the author is noteworthy. In 2005, Yalom dedicates other pages of fiction to a duo composed of psychotherapist Julius Hertzfeld and his patient Philip Slate - *The Schopenhauer Cure*. Confronted with his own death, the doctor decides to meet again the patient he failed to heal of obsessions. Amazingly, the doctor discovers that his patient had healed by reading Schopenhauer. Following the themes proposed by the previous novels, Yalom resumed the idea of collaboration between physician and patient. The anguish of both can be answered or at least reassured by mutual understanding. No one holds the absolute truth and, therefore, only a collaboration between human beings can bring benefits. We constantly learn from each other, we all ask the same questions that we are trying to find answers to, and they seem to come from working together. Gregarious beings, humans can only find the inner path when they open themselves, when they find that each holds a piece of truth and that no one can perceive it in its entirety. The imminence of death stir in the human soul the anguish of the unknown. Yalom, adopting Schopenhauer's point of view, seems to offer a possible solution: the more fulfilled life we have, the more we feel we have endeavored more, the less the anxiety falls before we fall into the abyss called non-existence. What really scares us, in essence, is not the passage to non-existence, but the intuition of the futility of our existence. Awareness of our efforts and our own values dampens our feelings of struggle in the end, because we realize that nothing can change. However, everything depends on us as long as we are alive. Starting from the idea that the birth brings ever closer to death, the urge that Yalom has for the human being is to live our life without regret as if we were willing to repeat infinitely this existence. Assuming each lived moment makes it easier for us to pass the unknown seems to be the conclusion reached by the author.

The Spinoza Problem (2005) is a novel that addresses anti-Semitic issues. Being adolescent, Alfred Rosenberg, convinced anti-Semitic, is required, as a punishment, to memorize whole passages from Gothe's writings that prove to be the read of the young man as a supporter of the philosophy of a Spinoza who had a Jew origin. Although Alfred Rosenberg's anti-Semitism (1893-1946) is known to the modern world, the novel brings a romantic bang through the doubt that Yalom infuses into his Nazi fiction. Alfred Rosenberg, known for racial theories, was one of the initiators of the "final solution." At the end of the war he was found guilty of crimes against humanity and was executed by hanging. Yalom weaves an unseen cloth between the destinies of the two: the great philosopher of Jewish origin and the Nazi of the modern world.

One of the specific human fears: anxiety in the face of death manifests in most of us in the form of denial. Since childhood, we feel anxious about non-existence. It can manifest itself as an alteration of the inner world. The confrontation of this fear gives value to human existence: "The mechanisms of denial are incorporated into one's life style and character structure. The individual's burden, as an adult no less than as a child, is to deal with personal

finiteness; and the study of psychopathology, to which I now turn, is the study of failed death transcendence.”⁴ The author, a fine analyst of human experiences and a psychotherapist practitioner, has seen in his medical career the most bizarre way that denial can embrace: repression feelings, omnipotence, accepting religious practices, all being nothing but strategies to acquire imaginary immortality. Another problem addressed by the author is responsibility. True healing of self cannot take place as long as individual does not assume existence and, implicitly, destiny. Yalom appeals to the conceptual accountability proposed by the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. “Responsibility means author-ship. To be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings and, if such be the case, one's own suffering. For the patient who will not accept such responsibility, who persists in blaming others-either other individuals or other forces-for his or her dysphoria, no real therapy is possible.”⁵ The choice belongs to everyone. The way we perceive reality, what is happening to us depends entirely on us. Everything that surrounds us is essentially subjective because the structure of the external world depends on our mental structure. Reality is a construct of our own consciousness. Each of us has an empirical and a transcendental one. If the individual can blame for something, there is a lack of action. This correlation of responsibility and freedom determines Yalom to conclude: “one is also entirely responsible for one's life, not only for one's actions but for one's failures to act.”⁶ Failure to take action is actually the central nerve that feeds the fears of many of us.

The existential theory, whose self-proclaimed adept in *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), is for Yalom a timeless land, in which the human being is studied in its depth. Beyond the limitations of time and space, all human beings face, according to the author, the same anxieties “To explore deeply from an existential perspective does not mean that one explores the past; rather, it means that one brushes away everyday concerns and thinks deeply about one's existential situation. It means to think outside of time, to think about the relationship between one's feet and the ground beneath one, between one's consciousness and the space around one; it means to think not about the way one came to be the way one is, but that one is. (...) The future-becoming-pre-sent is the primary tense of existential therapy.”⁷ The author draws an analogy with medicine. If the disease is considered to be the inability of the body to defend itself against the pathogen, in the same way the psychiatric pathology develops in some individuals in response to the interaction between the harmful environment and the low defense system “psycho-pathology depends not merely on the presence or the absence of stress but on the interaction between ubiquitous stress and the individual's mechanisms of defense.”⁸ The answer that Yalom seems to have found to be a universal panacea applicable to all individuals is the assumption of responsibility. The confrontation of evil, of what causes the inner disequilibrium, opens the way of healing and enhancing the individual's defense mechanisms: “Wisdom does not lead to madness, nor denial to sanity: the confrontation with the givens of existence is painful but ultimately healing. Good therapeutic work is always coupled with reality testing and the search for personal enlightenment.”⁹

Yalom is part of a new wave of medicine. These new representatives of spiritual healing realized that inner anxiety is, to a greater or lesser degree, a characteristic of all humans. Once fear has been identified as a general human trait, the role of the psychiatrist

⁴ Irvin David Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, Basic Books A Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1980, p. 109

⁵ Idem, p. 218

⁶ Idem, p. 220

⁷ Idem, p. 11

⁸ Idem, p. 13

⁹ Idem, p. 14

becomes a much more complex approach. Without being considered a pathological condition, anxiety must be addressed in an interdisciplinary way, experts conclude starting from the 1950s. The collaboration between neurology, psychiatry, religion and even philosophy seems to be the most pragmatic approach to some experiences that have characterized man since ancient times “The psychiatrist who asserts that anxiety is always pathological cannot deny the potentiality of illness in human nature, and he must account for the facts of finitude, doubt, and guilt in every human being; he must, in terms of his own presupposition, account for the universality of anxiety. (...) This is why more and more representatives of medicine generally and psychotherapy specifically ask for the cooperation with the philosophers and theologians.”¹⁰ Yalom has intuited the necessity of such an interdisciplinary approach and linked the philosophy he felt attracted to through his lectures and the profession he had been trained for: psychiatry.

Never willing to give up his literary creativity, the psychiatrist signed in 2017 a memorial volume entitled *Becoming Myself: A Psychiatrist's Memoir*. If that moment now he had used his readers with the analysis of other souls, this time the analysis turns towards himself. And in this memory book the central theme is empathizing. Yalom made out of sensing the sufferings of others not only the purpose of his life but also the soul profession. His reflexive nature, prone to the analysis of the deepest experiences, fits perfectly into the need to live affection as deeply as possible. The problem he has raised in all his psychoanalytic or literary writings is recurring: we are all in a spiritual journey to retrieve ourselves and to discover the purpose of our existence. The vast majority of individuals are building walls around them, barricading themselves from the need to defend themselves from the surrounding environment. Lost energy, decides physician, in a defensive way instead of being spent on constructive purposes. Too self-centered to overcome our own fears, frustrations and sufferings, we are unable to really communicate with our neighbor who asks for our help.

The preoccupation to hide our own weaknesses grinds the human soul and only increases despair. Unfortunately, the mercantile society of the modern day has intuited these weaknesses that it exploits for purely commercial purposes. The illusion of today's freedom is perhaps more dangerous than ever because it consumes energy for selfish purposes instead of teaching the human being to offer. Group therapy that the doctor has applied over the years is based on simple but effective principles. Thus, the inner healing process has as central a pivotal perspective as possible, on which to build of a more viable self. What we live in our inner world is lived by all members of the community. The most beneficial way we can self-heal is communicating, sharing information and feelings with others. The help we give to our neighbor is, in fact, a help that we give to ourselves. As a form of social living, interpersonal, empathetic and indulgence we show to our fellow men is what defines us. Affiliation to a group gives us the assurance of acceptance by society, and existential psychoanalysis tries to promote the individual's existence as part of something much more complex as a constituent element of society.

Doctor Yalom attacks the mores of modern society, even if he has to publicly expose himself through the development of the most salient aspect of himself. Exposing his most intimate experiences, Yalom undergoes a form of therapy. His memories are an alarm signal to the society that is heading on the wrong slope. By developing technology, we have all paid the supreme price: the loss of compassion, of what defines us as humans. The physician's confessions resonate in each of us because they address everyone and everything that comes to enforce the hypothesis from which the author himself starts: the universality of the experiences. The courage the author has shown in analyzing his own psychic life with the

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, Yale University Press, 1953, p. 71

detachment of the scientist to do so with others is an incentive for each reader to discard the false positives and to present themselves to others as they are in reality. What can be simpler and purer than to exist and to live with ourselves, with no false fortresses to protect us from others? Basically, we are all the same but we are trying to hide this. Life would be more natural and much simpler if mankind would give up self-destruction.

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