

Polish Philosopher Jacek Dobrowolski's Double Life: From Academic Philosophy to Literary Success as Maks Wolski

Polish philosopher Dobrowolski writes groundbreaking philosophy and literature, challenging cultural norms through his alter ego Maks Wolski's acclaimed novel Nicuś.

By Pawel Ciach

Note: Jacek Dobrowolski, a Warsaw philosopher, is author of the treatise "Is the will free?" As a fiction writer, under the pseudonym "Maks Wolski", he is also author of an excellent novel with Freudian and phenomenological overtones, challenging Polishness, Catholicism and received wisdom.

Are great philosophers great writers? I hear a loud "no!" from every student who's struggled through Kant or Hegel. So, let's ask the question this way: Is it possible to be as talented a creative writer as you are influential as a philosopher? For the moment let's agree that, while extremely rare, it's plausible. But who fills the bill? Who's a great philosopher and a great creative writer, too?

What about the mid-twentieth century French existentialists, all still widely read in French and in translation? Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus are famous for their drama, novels, and journalism, in addition to philosophy. Sartre, a novelist, playwright, journalist and general bon vivant, will have written philosophy that is a joy to read, right? So let's dive right into *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (French: *L'Être et le néant : Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*), published in 1943 at the low point of the second world war. This is one of his more familiar passages, on time.

Temporality is obviously an organized structure, and these three so-called elements of time: past, present, future, must not be envisaged as a collection of 'data' to be added together...but as the structured moments of an original synthesis.

Otherwise we shall immediately meet with this paradox: the past is no longer, the future is not yet, as for the instantaneous present, everyone knows that it is not at all: it is the limit of infinite division, like the dimensionless point.

You could hardly call this paragraph beautiful, but it's not entirely incomprehensible, either. Workman-like prose. Gets the job done. I'd give it a C+ and a 'good effort' (trust me, it doesn't sing in French, either!). If not for his social prominence in French intellectual circles, and his reputation as a journalist, Sartre's tracts on existentialism alone might not have found a publisher. Perhaps a vanity press?

Simone de Beauvoir was clearly more productive and talented than Sartre as a writer. She remained in his shadow too long, finally striking out for independence with *The Second Sex*, a work with greater influence on society her lover's existentialism. But what is her writing like when she expresses philosophical ideas? This from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*:

Men of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means. The more widespread their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces. Though they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them. Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life, and yet each feels himself more insignificant than an insect within the immense collectivity whose limits are one with the earth's.

I'd say it's at the same level as Sartre's philosophical writings. They spent a lot of time at Les Deux Magots sharing and developing ideas together, no wonder their philosophical prose is alike.

Albert Camus? *The Plague* and *The Stranger* are great evocative fiction that bring absurdist ideas to life via storytelling. But look at his central philosophical text, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Likewise and during every day of an unillustrious life, time carries us. But a moment always comes when we have to carry it. We live on the future: "tomorrow," "later on," "when you have made your way," "you will understand when you are old enough." Such irrelevancies are wonderful, for, after all, it's a matter of dying. Yet a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd.

I rest my case. The most creative French Existentialist writers, when writing about philosophy, conformed to a plodding, stodgy, academic style.

How about the writing style of German philosophers? Everyone will exclaim at once: Nietzsche! *Thus Spoke Zarathustra!* This is an extraordinary and visionary work, and likely the most sought-after work of philosophy found in Walmart. That said, it's a complicated interpretation of philosophy, intellectually inaccessible to an average reader, but the famous title and the famous author make it look good on the library shelf where you entertain guests after dinner. I give you the Zarathustra challenge. It's like the Ulysses challenge. Show me someone who's read these books to the end and can summarize the ideas without referring to Wikipedia and I'll buy you a beer...

I'm still waiting.,,

Bertrand Russell's prose is brilliant, witty and agile. He wrote deeply on philosophy, mathematics and logic. His talent for beautiful writing matches the best literary authors of his time, yet never was he tempted to exchange the pen of a logician and philosopher for that of a novelist or poet. A great loss, I think. I'd love to read his sonnets. I bet they'd be up there with Donne's. And a Bertrand Russell novel? Another Fyodor Dostoyevsky! Alas, these are works of the imagination only. They do not exist.

Now the moment you've been waiting for. If, in philosophical and literary traditions of France, Germany, or Britain, we can't find a literary philosopher who writes with equal fluency in both literature and philosophy, how about Poland? Polish writers are undervalued in the fields of European literature and philosophy. Can a Pole combine two talents and write wonderful literature as well as wonderful philosophy?

Jacek Dobrowolski is a well-known philosopher in Poland. I wouldn't venture to say that philosophy is important in Poland however. Not the case. Poland is not remotely comparable to France, for example, where philosophy has a long academic tradition inseparable from the education system. Sartre and de Beauvoir vied for first in the state exams for philosophy teachers, the so-called *agrément*. Sartre won, but some believe he cheated from his wife's work. State-sponsored philosophy, like state-sponsored cinema, creates many good works that conform to state standards, but few great ones that break the mold.

No, Poland will never compete with France in philosophy, certainly not in total philosophical output (measured in words, or ideas). France took wing from Catholicism with the existentialists, but Poland is still—but not forever?—

Catholic. Religion is important in Poland, not philosophy. Catholic priests teach ethics at school, not rationalists or ethicists. A book on philosophy that sells 500 copies is *La Grande Bouffe*! Poland is easily satiated with any kind of deep thought. We are not only an LGBT-free zone, we are also a philosophy-free zone...

Nonetheless, Jacek Dobrowolski appears on Warsaw radio as a philosopher, giving him a presence, at least amongst intellectuals who listen to the radio. As a philosopher he has achieved much. He is a laureate the Barbara Skarga philosophy grant, named for one of Poland's outstanding philosophers of the 20th century.

Dobrowolski fast-paced writing spools out narrative with verve and audacity.

It finally stands that only we - Mania, Yeruham, Didi, Hawa and I - are going to Kitkat, everyone else is already "too tired" and "this time" is unlikely to go to the sex party. Well, that's cool, only it turns out, of course, that four people fit into the cab, who would have guessed, and what a bummer. just at that moment everyone had already taken their seats and I was the only one left outside, an onlooker last.... So the Moroccan cab driver will not agree to let me top up, I just think to myself, if this were Morocco, there would be no problem, somehow I would fit in, stuffed, but this is fucking Berlin, fucking Europe, so I will have to get there ... mania waves me out the window from between Yeruham and Didi, bye bye, just get there fast, I'll see you in front of the entrance! A squeal of tires and they are gone, and I'm standing alone on a street in Berlin, where it's quickly becoming deserted, and I'm supposed to follow seemingly in their footsteps. I'm supposed to chase them!

No getting bored with Jacek Dobrowolski! His voice is audible and comprehensible in the group who follow him. As a philosopher his interests are broad. He examines modernity and postmodernity, individualism, atheism and freedom. But, most importantly, he is an independent philosopher, which is a rarity in the history of Polish philosophy, because most Polish philosophers deal solely with the history of philosophy. Original thought is rare.

Dobrowolski has philosophical books as stylistically original as they are original in thought: *The Philosophy of the Deaf*, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Man*, *The Art of Modern Man*, and most recently the excellent *Is the Will Free?*

This last book examines questions and imaginary ideas of analytic philosophy, picking up on Adam Morton's work on how we understand one another's behavior in everyday life, and how mutual intelligibility affects cooperative activity. Morton is a well-regarded philosopher, but unknown in Poland, at least until Dobrowolski "discovered" him.

Morton holds that the existence of free will is essentially a question about the ability to affect the past. If we have no influence on the past, we cannot affect the future either. Follow this further and we have no future and no other realm of existence, other what we derive from our past. This premise is the starting point of Dobrowolski the philosopher's alter ego, i.e. Maks Wolski the fiction writer.

We believe in the existence of free will absolutely. In our minds, it is impossible to deny. Language is our expression of free will. Even if no other possible futures can be willed, humans can have the will and freedom express themselves through creativity. Every act of language creates a new reality, Heidegger would say.

An against-the-tide philosophy lecturer may not appeal to academics. After years of teaching, Dobrowolski's contract at the philosophy department was not renewed. This turned out to be a blessing to the reading public. Jacek Dobrowolski became Maks Wolski and wrote an excellent novel, *Nicus*. He's a born writer! So sometimes it's good to get laid-off. It's good that there is only one past and only one future. In this view, it was inevitable that Jacek's expulsion from academia would produce a great novelist.

New Orgy of Thoughts

Dobrowolski was not a newcomer to the literary world when he left teaching. A founder and editor of the literary magazine "New Orgy of Thoughts", where he has also published his works. His texts appeared in literary magazines.

Maks Wolski, Dobrowski the philosopher's alter-ego, has written a traditional novel, *Nicus*, with protagonists, a plot, and a denouement. One could even call it a road novel, but the journey leads nowhere. It's available on Amazon. Maks Wolski's gesture at a traditional plot is an important statement at a time when prose, perhaps a bit like gender, is becoming ambiguous, fluid and changeable. Austrian novelist, playwright and poet Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) explored death, social injustice, and human misery in Austrian society. He was deeply pessimistic about Austrian culture. Wolski is equally merciless towards Polish society. Superficiality the lack of reckoning with a Nazi past are a common ground for Poland and Austria.

The December 24, 2010 NY Times book review declared Bernhard's body of work "the most significant literary achievement since World War II." With Maks Wolski, still early in his career, we perhaps will witness the emergence of another powerful social critic. He's worth watching.

Nicus is the story of a recently deceased father who spent all of the second world war in Dachau. His war trauma and advanced age meant he almost absent from his son's life.

Yes, it's April, spring, and sort of summer, April, the cruelest month, Dachau was liberated in April, but it wasn't that warm during that April liberation, because in the photos from those days the prisoners are dressed in coats and capes and whatnot, it doesn't look like it was warm in April 1945 in Dachau, rather it was chilly, and half of the thirty-seven thousand liberated were sick with typhus. (...) And did I tell you about the events on liberation day at Dachau? It occurred just after the Americans entered. When the Americans came, some infantry battalion commanded by a captain, the first thing they saw were fresh piles of corpses and wagons on the sidings also filled with corpses and the dying. What was already a rather normal sight for the prisoners, the American soldiers were so shocked that they decided to slaughter the entire camp crew immediately, right away. And they simply peppered the Nazis with machine guns, indeed, it was a Quentin Tarantino-style ride; peppering the Nazis with heavy weapons, making chaff out of them. (...) The Americans not only smashed the Nazis themselves, but also invited the liberators to join in the fun. In a few hours, several hundred Esemans were massacred. I think of those glorious hours of revenge ... did my father, who was already twenty-four years old at the time, take part in it? Did he bludgeon some Nazi? (...) I believe that Nazis do not necessarily deserve humanity ... It was a beautiful and good massacre. These events were later meticulously covered up by the American military authorities; nothing here is certain ni clear. The initiator was a certain Lieutenant Jack Bushyhead. He started the shooting, gave the password. (...) Jack twisted a stogie unhurriedly, watching them without emotion, with a stone face, lights a stogie, inhaled deeply, felt the tobacco raise his blood pressure, let out a cloud of smoke, and the Germans did not pay any attention to him at all. (...) He still looked up at the sky for a moment, breathed deeply a few times to do so with a light and clear mind, *sine ira et studio*. And then he opened fire.

Coming from Freud's need to search for the absence, the writer's analysis goes deep. Maks Wolski confronts readers with all the traumas he finds within himself, in his surroundings, and in the personal historical narrative of his absent father. Family trauma, combined with a depressing feeling of lack of self-worth in a society that does not share his values, become an explosive mixture. The explosion is like a supernova, both in the field of stylistic, linguistic and formal explorations, as in the content itself. In the Dachau passage above, it is notable how Wolski demonstrates—much more graphically than T. S. Eliot ever did—that April is indeed the cruelest month. The emotionless, matter-of-fact delivery of machine gun bullets into the hearts and heads of Nazi soldiers are a symbol, perhaps, of the random slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that assail us all, completely inconsistent with cozy worldviews that may comfort us, but do not agree with the hardness of reality.

Self-therapy via an uninterrupted hand-written monologue he then transcribes into a computer, is how Maks Wolski produces his stream-of-consciousness narrative. His self-therapy acknowledges the lack of free will and heartless fate's oversized impact in life. This allowed Wolski not only to heal the trauma but also to create important work.

Wolski is not the first Polish writer to wrestle with being Polish. The quest to understand 'Polishness' is the defining struggle of Polish literary Don Quixotes. An equally strong motif was present in Witold Gombrowicz's works. He was about to receive the Nobel Prize in 1967, but in the end the award went to Beckett, who was almost as good a writer as Gombrowicz.

Because as a philosopher Dobrowolski tackles postmodernity, the personal sense of defeat and humiliation has become a philosophical experience of decline. It had to be resisted, or the windmills would have taken him and torn him apart. The nothingness in *Nicus* is not only its own defeat, the process of getting even with family traumas, but it also, most and foremost, becomes the nothingness and trauma of Polishness, the neurosis of a Polish family entangled in the wartime and the Jewish past, coupled with provincial Catholicism, the recurring mantra of Marian prayers and chants, quotes from Polish baroque and Polish poetic epics. But doesn't shutting oneself in Polishness mean the risk of shutting oneself to the world? Does anyone else in the world suffer from Polishness, apart from the Poles? Well, yes, Dobro-Wolski (the philosopher) will answer, but if free will really existed, I wouldn't have to deal with Poland, I could deal with my relationship with Italy, which I also tackle in the novel. But parallel worlds are unknown to us, even if they exist.

Wolski managed to turn his trauma into a milieu experience, if not a generational one. This is the experience of a large part of the Polish elite in a country where philosophy is not taught, but where LGBT-free zones are designated and polling stations will be located inside churches in the next elections. Poland is a disease and Poland is a prison, it smothers you and abuses you, as Nicuś says. At the same time, the novel is excellent, engaging, intelligent and packed with self-irony, a piece of literature worthy of the attention of the best philosophers.