

Choromański's *Jealousy and Medicine*

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Michał Choromański (1904-72) is little known in the West, and has fared only slightly better in Poland.¹ Yet his novel *Jealousy and Medicine* (*Zazdrość i medycyna*) became a best seller when it was published in 1933, won the Nagroda Młodych Polskiej Akademii Literatycznej, and was translated into sixteen languages, among them English.²

Jealousy and Medicine is an admirable work, still fresh and modern after fifty years, and undeserving of the obscurity that has befallen it. I hope to arouse interest in Choromański's work through a closer look at his masterpiece. In particular, I would like to answer the chief criticism of *Jealousy and Medicine*, lodged by Leon Piwiński in 1933. He said, "As a whole, this remarkable novel lacks one thing—philosophical depth. Jealousy (and hence love, as well) has here been reduced to pathology perhaps a bit excessively."³ I hope to show that *Jealousy and Medicine* is a sly gloss on the work of a disturbed Austrian philosopher and that this fact is a key to the peculiar ideas and attitudes expressed in the novel.

The medical setting of *Jealousy and Medicine* was no doubt suggested by Choromański's experiences as a hospital orderly and later as a patient in the years after World War I. The story is a simple one, a love triangle between surgeon Tamten, his patient Rebeka, and her suspicious husband Widmar. Widmar's hired spy, Abraham Gold, is electrocuted on his way to report to Widmar, and the love triangle remains unchanged.

Choromański uses this slender story to explore the significance of love, truth, nature, and work. Love is seen as a natural force, violent, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable. Rebeka is the embodiment of this force. She is scarcely real; the reader never even gets a clear idea of her physical appearance. We are never told by the narrator how she looks: we must rely on the perceptions of other characters. Her skin is variously described as dark, olive, lily white, and pink. She is old; she is young. Her hair is chestnut, blond, black. She is beautiful; she is ugly. She is ordinary; she is sensual and disturbing. We rarely hear Rebeka speak and never perceive the world through her eyes. She remains closed to us as she does to the other characters, but at the same time she is the central figure in the book. Understanding her is critical to understanding the novel.

Whenever Rebeka is present, everything assumes an aura of unreality. During an operation on Rebeka's sex organs, the attendants lose their heads, the water does not boil, the surgeon curses, it is "an absolute nightmare" (p.86). On another

¹See, for example, Jerzy Krzyszoń, "Wspomnienie o Michał Choromańskim," *Wież*, 15, No. 9 (1972), 36-40; Jan Marx, "Po śmierci Michała Choromańskiego," *Kierunki*, 18, No. 6 (1972), 5; Hanna Kirchner, "Diabli wiedza co, czyli Choromański," *Teksty*, 2, No. 4 (1973), 34-39.

²*Jealousy and Medicine* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1964) adapted from an earlier translation by Eileen Arthurton-Barker (London: The Willow Press, 1946). All quotations are taken from the 1964 edition. For readers of Polish, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie reprinted *Zazdrość i medycyna* in 1973.

³Leon Piwiński, "Wiadomości literackie," in *Modern Slavic Literatures*, ed. Vasa D. Mihailovich et al. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1976), II, 265.

occasion, Rebeka is described as "utterly unreal." She causes in the men "a slightly cataleptic condition, both mental and physical" (pp. 48-49). The reader learns that it is the idea of Rebeka, of love, of the female principle, that is important, rather than Rebeka herself.

Tamten invests the false-hearted, lying Rebeka with all sorts of superior moral qualities because he loves her. The idea that men are powerless before nature's urge to reproduce is certainly not a new one. But Choromański's woman has been barren since an extrauterine pregnancy from yet another extramarital affair. The force of love, of woman, cannot be destroyed by barrenness, but only by truth. Rebeka is never stupid enough to give in to the men's demands for truth. Even if she did, it is by no means certain that the men would not find some way to twist her meaning to preserve their illusions. Tamten comes to see that love is a false and ephemeral attempt to avoid loneliness, but, like all men, he prefers it to the cure: truth, solitude, and work. Men pursue the truth, but in the end prefer illusions to solitude.

The two children of Abraham Gold play out this drama of men and women in miniature. Anielka, like Rebeka, always lies, while Boruch tells the truth. Boruch is a strange epileptic child who is in tune with nature, and sees what others cannot. His cryptic pronouncements make no sense to anyone else until much later, if at all. Boruch announces at the beginning of the novel, "Daddy has a light in his stomach," but no one understands that Boruch is talking about his father's electrocution until the very end of the book.

The key to this portrayal of the drama between men and women lies in the scene where Dr. Von Fuchs mentions Weininger's theories on women. Otto Weininger was extremely popular early in the century and certainly part of the success of *Jealousy and Medicine* was owed to Choromański's half-serious, half-satirical use of the ideas of Weininger as the philosophic basis of his novel. Weininger was a Viennese Jewish convert to Christianity, a sexually troubled genius who committed suicide at twenty-three, shortly after his major work, *Sex and Character (Geschlecht und Charakter)*, appeared in 1903.⁴ Drawing on evidence from biology, philosophy, literature, music, art, folk wisdom, and personal observation, Weininger attempts to demonstrate that women are sexuality incarnate, amoral, deceptive, devoid of ego, talent, genius, memory, logic, and the ability to love. The solution is a familiar one: stamp out sex, and women—and no doubt Weininger—will be saved.

Choromański's portrayal of Rebeka owes much to Weininger. Weininger says, "The female principle is . . . nothing more than sexuality" (p.90). For Choromański, Rebeka is a "kind of monster . . . made up . . . above all of sensual desires and scents" (p.49). Weininger maintains that "The love of a man for whom she does not care is only a gratification of the vanity of a woman. . . . A woman extends her claims equally to all men on earth" (p.203). Rebeka has had a string of lovers, and is not really in love with any of them. Weininger maintains that "The impulse to lie is stronger in women . . . [and] will be hard to resist if there is a practical object to be gained" (p.146). Rebeka lies constantly to keep the love of both Widmar and Tamten. Weininger knows his ideas will not be readily accepted: "[Men's] sexual egoism makes them prefer to see woman as they would like to have her, as they would like her to be" (p.x). In the end, despite overwhelming evidence of Rebeka's perfidy, Tamten manages to reaffirm his belief in her.

⁴Quotations from Weininger are taken from the 1906 edition published in New York by G. P. Putnam's Sons. Those wishing to learn more about Weininger might be interested in a psychiatrist's study of his life: *The Mind and Death of a Genius*, by David Abrahamson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946). Weininger's work was translated into Polish in 1922.

Choromański's use of the Jewish motif probably also stems from Weininger. Many of the characters' names are Jewish, and the Gold family are all Jews. Weininger believes that Jews share many similarities with women: both are amoral, both lack dignity, both are natural matchmakers. Perhaps Choromański had Weininger in mind when he decided to make his matchmaker-spy a Jew, and to employ many references to Jewish culture in his examination of women and the nature of love.

Weininger's work seems very dated today, but Choromański's book has hardly aged at all. Its light touch, its air of mystery and its artistry, its imagery and intricate structure, rescue it from the closet of curiosities and lift it into the realm of fine modern literature. Choromański uses imagery to make his characters and their actions seem more enigmatic and even portentous. For instance, he uses odors to link Rebeka and Abraham with sex and death. Rebeka has an "eroticism emanating from her which recalled her existence . . . sweetish, cloying, soothing" (p.21), and a sweetish, deathly odor permeates the apartment where Rebeka and Tamten make love. Abraham has a strange smell about him, as if he were just going to die, or were already dead." (p.5) When he dies, there is the "sweetish odor of the dissecting room, of the corpse, of death" (p.214). It is as if Rebeka's eroticism has overwhelmed Abraham and killed him.

Choromański uses natural elements like wind and water to help establish an atmosphere of cosmic significance. Throughout the story, a terrible wind heralding a storm creates terrible pressure. The storm breaks and the wind abates when Abraham is killed, and the emotional tension in Widmar and Tamten is released. When the storm breaks, the wind seems to conspire with water, a traditional symbol for women, in causing Abraham's electrocution, since he is wet when he touches the wires flying in the wind.

Another important symbol is that of falling. At least fifteen objects fall during the course of the novel, foreshadowing the scene where Abraham dies clutching the wires on the fallen pole. The foreshadowing lends an air of inevitability to the event, a feeling that it is impossible to avoid what finally must happen: the crushing of Adam by the victorious life force.

It is not surprising that Choromański plays with names. "Tamten" means "that man," a suitable name for Widmar's rival. "Widmar" is a play on *widmo*, which means "phantom" or "specter" and possibly also on *mara*, which means "ghost," "dream," or "nightmare."⁵ Widmar's whole situation is unreal, ephemeral, nightmarish—hence his name. "Rebeka" is an odd choice of names, but there are some similarities with the biblical Rebekah, who was temporarily barren, and who deceived her husband Isaac. The names of the Gold brothers, Abraham and Isaak, recall the story of sacrifice in Genesis, but here it is Abraham being sacrificed at the hand of Isaak, an electrician who has been working at the site where Abraham meets his death.

Perhaps Choromański's cleverest device is the use of an atmosphere of playful mystery which permeates the entire novel. Choromański tells his story in a long flashback. As with most flashbacks, a situation is presented, but the events leading up to and explaining that situation remain unknown until gradually revealed in the course of the story. The characters themselves do not understand the meaning of various events, or how to interpret the evidence they do possess. We are made to participate in the emotions of these characters by being confronted with the same problems: a lack of information, and an inability to comprehend what we do know.

⁵Choromański's facility with Polish is remarkable since he learned it as a Ukrainian émigré after 1924. He fled Poland during the Second World War, eventually settling in Canada where he wrote little. His career revived when he returned to Poland in 1959, evidently stimulated by contact with Polish again.

The first pages of the novel, filled with contemporaneous cameo scenes covering only a few moments in time, give the climax of the novel. We do not realize this until the same material is repeated at the end of the book, however. Only then do we realize that Abraham Gold has died, and how, and why. And we understand why Widmar is right when he says, "I'll never learn anything." He has tried to find out about his wife, but he will never learn anything because nature is against him and because he does not really want to know anything.

The rest of the novel is developed in somewhat longer scenes, with dizzying shifts backward and forward in time. The rapid shifts between scenes and the fragmentary nature of the information given in the scenes whets our curiosity and gives an air of emergency and unreality to the action.

The reader can track down allusions, chase symbols, and decode structure with some success, but there are many, many mysterious events and images that cannot adequately be explained. (What, for instance, is the significance of the skiing incident? Why does Abraham seem to have feathers? What is the meaning of sloping shoulders? We grow to understand how Widmar feels, surrounded by bits of a puzzle whose color and shape are intriguing, but whose significance in the overall pattern is unclear.) The reader, like Widmar and Tamten, must conjecture to fill the holes in the puzzle, and try to find out what the leftover pieces mean. We must be content in the end with less than the whole picture, just like Widmar and Tamten. This is hard to accept unless one accepts Choromański's premise about the nature of life and truth, and evidently, the nature of a piece of fiction: that the essence of life is a mystery, the basis of life and love is a lie, and there are no absolute answers to anything.

Choromański's sly use of Weininger's philosophy as a vehicle for exploring the irrationality of life remains potent today. His conception ranges outside the narrow sociological concerns so often found in Eastern-bloc literatures, and places his novel in the mainstream of Western literature. His meticulous craftsmanship and his cinematic use of montage, symbol, and suspense bear comparison with the work of the best modern experimental fiction writers.