

## When Nietzsche Wept: A Plea for a Measure of Maturity

I'd like to thank the filmmaker Pinchas Perry for making this moving film and allowing us to screen it for you prior to its release. In many ways, I think making a film like this is a courageous gesture – not just because the subject of a German philosopher and a 19<sup>th</sup> C. Viennese physician might be one of special interest, but because it challenges our assumptions about romance without resorting to cleverness or an easy cynicism. We live in a cultural moment that doesn't seem to value the kind of mature sincerity offered in this treatment of the relationship between these two important historical figures. In psychological terms, I think what the movie describes (more so I would argue than the novel, which to me feels more like a clash of ideas or philosophies), is a rejection of romantic obsession – what passes in traditional romantic novels and films as “true love,” as an infantile and unhealthy fixation with what the Scottish psychoanalyst W.R.D. Fairbairn would call “the bad object.” In its place, the film offers us what Nietzsche calls “the footbridge of friendship” as a deep and transformative relationship that bridges the chasm of aloneness and isolation in which we live.

What makes this such a bravely anti-romantic story, and also a powerful allegory of the transformative power of the psychoanalytic relationship, is the way these two men struggle to release themselves from the bonds of their obsessive, and I would argue, infantile attachment, to these two women who represent versions of their traumatic experiences of their early mothers. To differing degrees, they succeed in freeing themselves because of the genuine footbridge of friendship they painstakingly build together – in the jargon of contemporary intersubjectivity, the reciprocal and therapeutic connection they “co-create.”

Both these men find themselves helpless and overwhelmed by their feelings for the object of their obsession. In his seminal paper on “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud describes how in melancholia, the lover is overwhelmed by what he loves – he is emotionally and psychologically crushed by it. What Melanie Klein and Fairbairn make explicit is that this state of helpless dependency, overwhelming need and passion, is characteristic of the early infantile attachment to the frustrating or unsatisfying mother. In Nietzsche's case, and he is clearly the more damaged and ill of the two men, the rage and contempt he heaps upon Lou Salome is also characteristic of what Freud calls the melancholic's “constellation of revolt” against the beloved mother figure, who is experienced as having profoundly betrayed the baby by withdrawing or withholding her affection. In one of his letters to Lou Salome quoted in the book as representative of his rage and despair, Nietzsche claims, “If I banish you from me now, it's a frightful censure of your whole being.... You have caused damage, you have done harm – and not only to me but to all the people who have loved me: this sword hangs over you.” What I think he's describing is a simple reversal of roles here – the baby who feels banished and condemned by the unavailable or unloving mother now wields the sword of censure and rejection.

The link between Bertha and Breuer's dead mother is explicitly captured in the movie with the shot of Bertha Breuer's tombstone. At the end of the climatic and hallucinatory voyage into his existential freedom, Breuer realizes the link between his imprisonment in the romantic phantasy of Bertha and his mother frozen in time in his mind – I quote from the book: “Only your mother, Bertha, lies suspended in time, waiting for you” (268). Later he makes the link more explicitly, “some adult figures enter a child's mind and refuse to leave. Maybe one has to force them out before one can be master of one's own thoughts” (273).

This is how the film characterizes romantic obsession then – as an unhealthy attachment to or fixation upon a traumatically bad early mother. This explanation helps us to understand the powerful storms of love and hate, the passivity and helplessness of the lover, the heightened, life or death quality of the experience. This kind of relationship is a reliving of a time when our psychological survival did in fact depend upon somehow winning the love of this powerful and unavailable person – of needing her to show how truly special we were. Given such a stormy early experience of dependency and vulnerability, more modulated relationships tend to feel deathly pale or insubstantial. Patients suffering from this condition tend to describe more healthy relationships as “boring” or lacking passion. The lives of Breuer and Nietzsche represent two alternative outcomes to this situation – the former feels deadened and trapped by an obligatory adult life, while harboring fantasies of returning to the tumult of his early life, while the latter manically cuts himself off from all emotional contact and casts himself as utterly self-sufficient – an island unto oneself.

So if the movie offers us a theory of romantic obsession as a regression to a preoedipal infantile attachment to a bad mother -- a terrible reliving of our profound and chaotic helplessness in the face of overpowering early love and our need for every kind of care and devotion from our mothers, what does it offer us as the way out? I suggested in the opening that I believe the answer lies in the metaphor of the footbridge, which Nietzsche has described as a genuine kind of link between two equals. In his early philosophical work, “The Gay Science,” which figures prominently in the story, Nietzsche uses the metaphor of the footbridge to describe the connection between two souls.

Over the footbridge: when dealing with people who are bashful about their feelings, one has to be able to dissimulate; they feel a sudden hatred toward anyone who catches them in a tender or enthusiastic or elevated feeling, as if he had seen their secrets. If one wants to do them good in such moments, one should make them laugh or utter some cold jocular sarcasm: then their feeling freezes and they regain power over themselves. But I am giving the moral before the story. There was time in our lives when we were so close that nothing seemed to obstruct our friendship and brotherhood, and only a small footbridge separated us. Just as you were about to step on it, I asked you: ‘Do you want to cross the footbridge to me?’ – But then you didn't want to any more and when I asked again, you were silent. Since then, mountains and torrential rivers, and everything which separates and alienates, have been cast between us, and even if we wanted

to reach each other, we couldn't anymore! But when you think of that little footbridge now, you have no words anymore – only sobs and bewilderment. 41-2

In this passage Nietzsche describes a missed opportunity for connection that comes to haunt him. It's easy to imagine this passage providing the impetus behind the novel, which seems to unfold the exquisite sensitivity of those "who are bashful about their feelings" and the need to always maintain "power over themselves." In his initial consultation with Breuer, Nietzsche explains that "thrice I have reached out and attempted to build a footbridge to others. And thrice I have been betrayed."

In the novel, Nietzsche describes his capacity to trust and feel vulnerable with women as seriously damaged by his early life – his father's death left him surrounded by what he calls "cold and distant women" – his mother, his sister, his grandmother. And then he met Lou Salome, who seemed to offer him a powerful connection – emotional, sexual, and intellectual. "She would be my student, my protégé, my disciple," he enthuses. And yet the very inequality of those terms describes something far from the perfect friendship among equals he says he seeks, and which he ultimately finds with Breuer. It is only by Breuer agreeing to submit to Nietzsche as a patient, to exchange places with him, that Nietzsche can risk stepping on the footbridge again.

"A deep man needs friends," he says, and through the painful and oddly constrained mechanism of their clinical adventure together, the two men forge precisely such a footbridge, one that takes them out of their isolation and their entrapment in their infantile past, and allows them to live what the movie so powerfully depicts as a life of mature acceptance of one's path. Paradoxically, and it is the paradox at the heart of psychoanalysis, only by submitting oneself voluntarily to the state of regressive dependency, of vulnerability, of putting oneself into another's hands, can a genuine mature strength and independence be forged. Only through his tears, and the vulnerability and trust they signify, can Nietzsche finally become independent. Without this moment, his "independence" and isolation can only be seen as a symptom of his manic defense against need and trust – against what he calls friendship.

The movie condenses and captures beautifully the climatic scene in which Nietzsche finally crosses the footbridge to an open and trusting emotional connection with Breuer. In depicting Nietzsche's confession of his relationship with Lou Salome, the filmmaker offers us a scene described in the novel in which Nietzsche offers his heart to Lou only to have her reject him. The film depicts this moment as occurring as they are walking across a footbridge of stones by the edge of the lake, and the moment of rejection is shown as one of losing his balance. And yet the sharing of this moment, the coming clean with his having his own romantic obsession, represents a genuine emotional footbridge to the other that sets him free. He weeps for joy at the paradox that sharing his feelings of heartbreak and isolation becomes his liberation from heartbreak and isolation. He describes finally feeling touched in the moment that he describes his feeling of never having been touched. His weeping in the movie powerfully conveys this moment of a friendship among equals.

I've often used the word 'friend' before, but not until this moment has the word ever been wholly mine. I've always dreamed of a friendship in which two people join together to attain some higher ideal. And here, now, it has arrived! You and I have joined together in precisely such a way! We've participated in the other's self-overcoming. I am your friend. You are mine. We are friends We – are – friends. 300

What we are left with is so much less than the typical happy ending – there is no reunion between Nietzsche and Lou Salome, Nietzsche doesn't leave his lonely wandering scholar life to sit by the hearth with Breuer's family. But even so, we should not minimize the powerful and mature resolution of these two men's emotional crises – what we get instead of a romance ending is a compelling allegory of a mutually satisfying psychoanalytic process, which must necessarily end with separation, yet within which each party is able to move out of some impasse and grow and deepen in their capacity to feel alive and self-realized.