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Trapped in a Vicious Circle of the Tragic Triad...Miltonian Satan and Conradian Kurtz's Process of Unearthing Authentic Identity

There are spheres of human culture that are capable of appealing with a powerful force to a person's heart at times allaying - like catharsis - surrounding anxieties and at times bringing excitement of unexpectedness to the existence brimful with the quotidian.¹ One of these spheres is indubitably literature, the ever-growing circle of intertextuality and social communication that, as it is held by Stephen Greenblatt, is an inconceivable "circulation of social energy."² What is of significance, however, is the fact that literature is not only marked with its openness to intertextuality within strict literary borders, it is likewise characterised by its readiness to mingle with other spheres of human thought. One of the most noticeable copartners in such a symbiosis seems to be psychology with its various derivatives. That psychology discloses a lot in common with literature on the ground of the same origin - the human psyche - is indisputable. According to Markowski, "psychoanalysis applicable to literary theory [...] focuses mainly on a neurotic subject expressing one's subjectivity through the text. Literary text, then, is treated as a symbolic representation of neurosis."³ In truth, the literary figures that the author of the article attempts to analyse disclose, despite their powerfulness revealed in a variety of shapes, one serious weakness. They are, in accordance with their morbid philosophy, subliminally depraved of something which is so precious to them and development of their own subjectivity, and by reason of this lack or an irrevocable wound, they experience a form of neurosis that vehemently pushes them towards evil, the only option for them. Thus, the intention here is to take a closer look at the process of

¹ A different version of the article was incorporated into the author's doctoral dissertation entitled *The Archetype of Evil Genius – A Comparative Study: John Milton, Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky.*

 ² Geoffrey Harpham, One of Us – The Mastery of Joseph Conrad (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996),
xii.

³ Paweł Markowski, *Teorie Literatury XX wieku – Podręcznik*, translation mine (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2007), p. 53.

unearthing supreme evil characters' authentic identity while unconditionally plunging into iniquity.

Before the discussion turns to sheer psychological aspects of the painstaking process of discovering one's authentic subjectivity, it is of significance to point to evil as the predominant attribute of both Satan and Kurtz's existence. This is the trait that initiates, facilitates and, in truth, permeates the entire process. To put it briefly, iniquity is brought into the stage by means of such words as "Evil, be thou my good"⁴ and, as far as the agent is taken into consideration, the "wilderness [...] sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite."⁵ Wickedness powerfully shapes all spheres of Kurtz's existence and relations to other characters. It provides him with a crucial dose of energy and incentive. He is defined by, and eventually, conquered by evil - "Kurtz has indulged in unhealthy emotions to gorge his falsely nurtured ego. Since all he does is without any conflict of consciences, he becomes evil incarnate,"⁶ holds Mathew. The truth is that proclivity for iniquity finds its expression in a thought-out infliction of suffering upon natives. Thus, it seems feasible to propose the hypothesis that Kurtz, as if submerged in prehistory - Marlow asserts that "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" 7 – is an unadulterated descendant of Cain, the first murderer, "cursed from the ground, which has opended its mouth to receive his brother's blood,"⁸ an inflictor of crime and torment. He is the evil incarnate heralding the era of power and violence.

On the same front of wickedness the figure of Satan emerges, the arch-rebel from *Paradise Lost*, "the story of his inevitable degeneracy, the result of obstinacy in evil."⁹ In fact, whatever he does, thinks or utters is provoked by malevolence which pulsates as blood in his damned heart. While studying Foe's limitless potential for evil Helen Gardner acknowledges that Satan's

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Edinburgh: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996), IV.110. The Roman numeral refers to the number of the Book, whereas the Arabic one(s) signifies the number(s) of the verse(s).

⁵ Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," in: *Youth and Two Other Stories by Joseph Conrad* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1928), p. 115.

⁶ Anita Mathew, "An Eastern Appreciation of Joseph Conrad: His Treatment of Evil in 'Heart of Darkness' and *Under Western Eyes*," in: *Joseph Conrad: East European, Polish and Worldwide*, ed. Wiesław Krajka (Boulder – Lublin – New York: East European Monographs – Maria Curie-Skłodowska University – Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 318.

⁷ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 92.

⁸ The Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible (New York and Glasgow: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1971), Genesis IV.11.

David Daiches, Milton (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1971), p. 158.

inveterate hatred against God and his malice towards man belongs to the earliest beginnings of *Paradise Lost* in Milton's creative imagination. Satan has the objectivity of a dramatic figure, and resists all attempts to reduce him to a mere personification of evil.¹⁰

What is more, the vision of Satan who feverishly soars towards Paradise is even more depraved than the one shown in the first two Books of the epic, in the den of sadness. His more sophisticated depravity is exposed by the fact that his evil is not only grounded on impulse but, first of all, on reckoning. From this time forth it is for him the matter of cautious preference which stigmatises his quest for revenge and subjectivity. Iniquity, in truth, is a force that pushes him into solitary mission of destructiveness that finally devours its victim. Satan conjures up evil repeatedly as an addict who cannot exist without the thrill of indulging himself in wickedness.

In truth, the portrayal of iniquity of those supreme evil characters can be enhanced by William Shakespeare who in his play "Julius Caesar," by means of Antony's speech, asserts that the "evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interrèd with their bones."¹¹ But, is it feasible that both Kurtz and Satan are ontologically unwavering in their wickedness? Is there not a morsel of possible good and, consequently, dynamism in their psycho-moral constitution? Are they really deprived of thoughts or deeds that could extenuate gravity of their deplorable situation? Can they only be distinguished as stagnant constructs incapable of undergoing any change? At this point, the author of the paper will only assert that the answer to all those questions is negative.

If the reader took Satan and Kurtz's wickedness aside for a moment and focused upon two passages, one could be steered to perceive two figures from a different perspective. Thus, at the end of the novella the reader becomes familiar with such news:

I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something. And indeed I don't know whether he had been a pauper all his life. He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there.¹²

And in the epic God in Book V passes such an announcement:

Your head I him appoint, And by myself have sworn to him shall bow All knees in Heaven, and shall confess him Lord [...] [...] him who disobeys,

¹⁰ Helen Gardner, *A Reading of Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 32.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar," in: *The Oxford Shakespeare – The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), III.ii.76–77.

Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 159.

Me disobeys, breaks union.¹³

There is not any doubt that their efforts focused on achieving a high social status (Kurtz) or on rejection of God treated as equal (Satan), push them towards disobedience. In truth, on account of predicament, they stand an opportunity of being perceived not only as utterly wicked, but rather as trapped in a situation without exit. They can be perceived as being ensnared in tragic triad, the phenomenon described by an Austrian psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1905–1997). He asserts that nobody is sure to be saved from coping with three commonly experienced realities in an existence: pain perceived as the reality of anguish, death as the reality of our mortality, and guilt as the reality of our human imperfection. Those three polarities of the tragic triad have "a great part in the life of the human and cannot be avoided."¹⁴ Significantly, those three inevitable realities are factors of a steady development as well as a quest for meaning. Thus for this reason both Satan and Kurtz can be perceived as being thrust into the matrix of tragic triad directing them, step by step, towards discovery of their genuine subjectivity. This process which allows them to be more aware of their needs for meaning and spiritual discovery is nevertheless long and painful.

Firstly, it is not a complicated task to discern pain as an essential section of both Satan and Kurtz's existence. They are stigmatised with suffering that reveals its force on their mission of wickedness and destruction. In truth, the first snap-shot of the fallen Satan, prostrate on the lake of fire, is marked with anguish, distress and uncertainty. A vision of a permanent pain tortures him severely. What is more, apart from anguish the Foe fetches with him wherever he betakes himself, Satan's brand new disposition is being reiterated by means of other characters' vocalisations. The most noteworthy one is the rebuke administered by Gabriel who in Book IV disparages the Arch-Rebel in such words:

But wherefore thou alone? Wherefore with thee Came not all Hell broke loose? Is pain to them Less pain, less to be fled? or thou than they Less hardy to endure? Courageous chief, The first in flight from pain".¹⁵

And even though the stinging reproach is instantaneously answered by the loquacious Fiend, it cannot change the perspective from which the reader and other literary characters in the epic

¹³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V.606–08, 610–11.

¹⁴ Scott C. Peterson, "The Similarities between Frankl's Logotherapy and Luther's Concepts of Vocation and the Theology of the Cross," in: *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging*, ed. Melvil A. Kimble (Binghamton: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2000), p. 64.

Milton, Paradise Lost, IV.917-21.

observe him as a fugitive from torment, the suffering that has materialised in consequence of his own disobedience, yet in the Empyrean.

Nevertheless, while Satan is being primarily associated with an internal anguish, the Conradian evil genius is even more miserable. Kurtz is stigmatised with an internal and an external suffering as well. The latter manifests its force in the shape of illnesses that, providentially for the agent, bring him closer, as it is held by Bohlmann, to "his perception of his own nothingness."¹⁶ The news of Kurtz's disease, the "external sign of Kurtz's inner madness (the disease of the soul),"¹⁷ is initially brought by the manager whose familiarity with the matter is based solely upon hearsay – "There were rumours that […] Mr. Kurtz, was ill."¹⁸ Other references to Kurtz's infirmities belong to his devoted follower, the Russian, who is remarkably proud of curing his idol of two illnesses. What is more, the agent's pain is the platform upon which the reader is capable of drawing parallels between Kurtz and Satan – "'I heard he was lying helpless, and so I came up – took my chance,"¹⁹ argues the Russian.

The existence submerged in an agonising distress unavoidably escorts them to the moment of their encounter with a shattering force of responsibility. In truth, guilt – the reality of innate fallibility – is grudgingly accepted by them. Their hectic activity either in Hell, Eden or jungle clearly testifies to their yearning to delegate culpability – another element of the tragic triad – onto shoulders of the weaker ones, onto those who are, rather unwillingly, dependant on them. That is why, Satan is bent on searching unity with both his horrid crew and Adam and Eve on the mutual ground of disobedience and evil. The Fiend's sinister desire is exposed the moment he is summoning his army following their collapse. For him the vision of his lonely bearing the burden of responsibility for defiance and eventual fall is indeed excruciating. The Arch-Rebel acts fast and, after the preliminary courtesies, verbally attacks his own forces. He assaults those who have submissively listened to his orders – Lucifer's behest, passed to his co-partner in crime, Beelzebub, is shown in Book V: "Tell them that, by command" they are "to prepare / Fit entertainment to receive our King, / The great Messiah."²⁰ However in Hell he shouts:

have ye chosen this place After the toil of battle to repose

¹⁶ Otto Bohlmann, *Conrad's Existentialism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), p. 46.

Ewa Bobrowska, "Above the Banks of Darkness: Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and Søren Kierkegaard's Existentialism," in *Joseph Conrad: Between Literary Techniques and Their Messages*, ed. Wiesław Krajka (Boulder – Lublin – New York: East European Monographs – Maria Curie-Skłodowska University – Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 194.
Conrad. "Hoort of Darkness" – 75

¹⁸ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 75.

¹⁹ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 130.

²⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V.685, 689–91.

Your wearied virtue, for the ease you find To slumber here, as in the vales of Heaven? Or in this abject posture have ye sworn To adore the Conqueror?²¹

The reader perceives a radical shift from the pronoun "I" to "you," as though the army of the wicked were solely responsible for the actual status-quo. Moreover, expansion of his iniquity is so enormous that he desires to locate accountability for it upon the first people's shoulders as well. In short, his perilous enterprise could be summarised as an agonizing yearning for evading culpability or, what is worse, for shifting some part of it onto the blameless people: "League with you I seek / And mutual amity, so strait, so close, / That I with you must dwell, or you with me / Henceforth."²² Satan's yearning is likewise tinged with a powerful dose of envy as he confronts his wretchedness with bliss of the first parents in the Garden of Eden.

Similarly to the Foe, the Conradian Kurtz – perceived as an inflictor of moral iniquity, the awe-inspiring agent that in the eyes of Marlow transforms "from the bearer of Western Civilization to the possessed demon,"²³ permeating and infusing with brutality, as pestilence, the realm of jungle - is struggling with all his might so as to shift the responsibility onto natives for his being entrenched in the imperialistic machinery. The truth is that the process of colonisation is marked not only with lofty ideals (sadly enough, confined to the sphere of theoretical discourse as shown on the example of Kurtz's hyper-eloquent, albeit hyper-fake report) but, to a more profound degree, it is stained with atrocities, dehumanisation, voracity, and lack of restraint. Accordingly, it is feasible to formulate a hypothesis that while enhancing his inclination for crime-ridden iniquity along with his forceful assuming the position of natives' deity, Kurtz is, in reality, behaving like a neurotic child who is unable to deal with his predicament appropriately. Besides, Marlow hints that Kurtz, regardless of being possessed by the darkness of jungle and of being an "extremist,"²⁴ can be recognized as an emotional person. He is capable of ingenuity, writing disturbing reports, and more importantly, of drawing "men towards him by what was best in them."²⁵ Hence, psychologically, profoundly felt incongruity between theory and practice impels him to engage himself in more sophisticated atrocities upon natives (the reader is informed that Kurtz has ordered the heads of the rebels to be placed on the stakes around his house). Thus, Kurtz's wickedness can be perceived as a manifestation of guilt experienced by the hyper-creative person marked with

²¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I.318–23.

Milton, Paradise Lost, IV.375–78.
Liliona Silvaraka, A Shart History of

Liliana Sikorska, A Short History of English Literature (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2007), p. 464.
Grand William C. C. Lander, and A. S. Short History of English Literature (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2007), p. 464.

²⁴ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 154.

²⁵ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 159.

neurosis, the person whose heart is, on one side, capable of loving his Intended and, on the other, of abominating natives.

Two previous elements of tragic triad, that is suffering and guilt, are augmented by another one. The concept of death – the reality of transitoriness – emerges as the most significant, yet it is the most horrifying. The truth is that the Foe is gradually changing for worse, with an excruciating finish with the vision of an infernal serpent, "the shape he once adopted – so he thought – on his initiative."²⁶ Thus although being portrayed as prevailing in his collapse, the Fiend is crushed under an unbearable load of negative emotions which step by step devastate his glorious appearance, ruthlessly striping him of a wealth of masks that become his element while assuming the attire of the archetype of evil genius. Broadbent observes that the Foe "diminishes in stature all the way through and drops out two books before the end."²⁷ That is why he is shown as moving swiftly towards Paradise and Hell, wherein the ultimate image of degradation is appallingly projected. Burden's explanation is worth being cited wholly:

Milton's account of the transformation scene in Hell presents precisely the sort of tragedy that he does not want us to see in Book IX. Acted out in Hell is the tragedy of doom, its heroes the damned. In the midst of their applause for Satan's success with Man, the devils are turned suddenly into snakes.²⁸

After having exultantly returned to his genuine abode – hell perceived as a spatial entity but as a state of mind as well – Satan is at last presented both to the reader and to himself in his true colours. Significantly, he accomplishes an inward progressive movement towards self-discovery, the psychomoral effort explained by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish theologian and philosopher who holds that the growth of "subjectivity requires the constant constructing of itself in the ancient dialectics of torment, namely, the yearning for being oneself and the analogous desire for not being oneself".²⁹ Nevertheless, from this time forth, the Fiend finds himself at such a juncture of his existence that he does not have to fake anything, his vile appearance equals his innermost desires presenting him as the evil genius profoundly racked with iniquity he once accepted so enthusiastically.

Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 79.
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John Broadbent, *Paradise Lost – Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 157.

²⁸ Denis H. Burden, *The Logical Epic: A Study of the Argument of Paradise Lost* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 147.

²⁹ Ewa Podrez, *W kręgu dobra i zla – Zarys historii etyki od starożytności do czasów współczesnych*, translation mine (Warszawa: Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania i Przedsiębiorczości im. Bogdana Jańskiego, 1998), p. 171.

Coming back to Kurtz, it is noteworthy to assert that, by situating a physical frailty prior to references of the agent's insanity and death, Conrad encourages the reader to observe that the first one is only the preface to more profound mental deformities. Hopefully for Kurtz, the awareness of it dawns upon him at the moment of his death, allowing him to accept the excruciating truth about his existence, and being pressed "to confront the absurdity of his mission, placed in the reality that mercilessly reflects one's most repressed iniquities, he finally acknowledges the pitiful truth of his condition."³⁰ When Marlow eventually reaches Kurtz, he perceives the feeble and emaciated caricature of once-powerful natives' sovereign who has been enduring dilapidation as the corollary of his enthralment with the darkness of jungle. Besides, Kurtz's deterioration is juxtaposed with lunacy perceived as his enthusiastic involvement in rituals pervading wilderness. Madness testifies to his inevitable corrosion which eventually reduces him to "the hollow sham."³¹

Unquestionably, although Kurtz's death is offered as the result of hatred, scheming, pride and voracious desire, it is the momentous episode in his wicked existence. It discloses, as a sharp knife, his genuine identity as well as his motives that eventually lead "him to become, as Marlow will say, both 'lost' [...] and 'mad',"³² the one who is marked with ever-expanding narcissism that is "self-limiting and self-alienating," standing for "the root of evil" and shaping in that way the narcissist who "exists in social isolation."³³ Nonetheless, despite his infirmity, one of his greatest gifts remains, his profound voice, sounding deep to the very last breath, permitting him to articulate his farewell words that amount to the ultimate uproar of self-condemnation of his atrocious existence.

The truth is that even though both Kurtz and Satan seem to be equal with regard to two previously-analysed constituents of the tragic triad – they similarly endure anguish and culpability – death steps forward as the reality that discriminates them utterly. Being obstinate in wickedness till the very end, the Fiend does not grasp an opportunity of being redeemed by God. From the very inception, immediately after his collapse, the arch-rebel pronounces obstinate persistence in being iniquitous and, therefore, fallen forever:

Infernal World! And thou, profoundest Hell, Receive thy new possessor – one who brings

³⁰ Bobrowska, "Above the Banks," p. 194.

³¹ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 147.

³² Anna Teresa Tymieniecka, "Beyond Evil in *Heart of Darkness*: Levinasian Face-to-Face as Reliable Narration," in *The Enigma of Good and Evil: The Moral Sentiment in Literature*, ed. Anna Teresa Tymieniecka (Springer: Dordrecht, 2005), p. 97.

⁵⁵ Frederick Warren Morris, *Escaping Alienation – A Philosophy of Alienation and Dealienation* (Maryland: University of Press America, 2002), p. 58.

A mind not to be changed by place or time. [...] What matter where, if I be still the same.³⁴

Significantly, Satan's denial of change is sarcastically manifested by his being reluctantly transmogrified into the serpent in Book X; although the external change does occur, the object of the process remains perfectly the same – either at the beginning in Hell (Book I and II) or at the end in Hell (Book X) Satan is in his essence the rebellious angel of destruction. Conversely at the threshold of Kurtz's demise when he articulates his parting words – "The horror! The horror!"³⁵ – the agent is rewarded with a meaningful glimpse into truth of his deplorable condition, his genuine subjectivity. As it is held by Johnson, an "awareness of the quality of nothingness – and I think Marlow believes Kurtz has gained such awareness – has always been prelude to spiritual growth"³⁶ of Kurtz. At his deathbed the agent is internal blindness. Significantly enough, this illumination escorts him to redemption, and his concluding words disclose acceptance of wickedness and shows "this sense of responsibility and freedom not only by his effect on the natives but from an increasing awareness of his own emptiness."³⁷

The author of the article does not aspire to throw an utterly new light upon the question of the Miltonian Satan and the Conradian Kurtz's entanglement in the matrix of tragic triad. What emerges from the analysis, however, is the undeniable fact that those two supreme evil characters ought to be treated as dynamic characters – gifted with an in-depth insight (especially Kurtz) – rather than static archetypal constructs. The truth is that a deep psychological constitution allows them to undergo constant changes that, hopefully for them, facilitate the procedure of ascertaining their genuine subjectivity. That their existence is exceptionally difficult is irrefutable, yet we cannot forget about the painful truth that they are accountable for such a course of events. However despondent they might be, they are outstandingly intelligent figures and, accordingly, they should have been able to foresee at least some consequences of their commotion. Nevertheless, it is beyond any doubt that due to their upheaval and disenchantment, they took the hazardous route amidst meanders of the tragic triad towards truth about themselves. And while acting that way they are awarded with an insight since, as it is held by Frankl, "if there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be

³⁴ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I.251–53, 256.

³⁵ Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," p. 149.

³⁶ Bruce Johnson, *Conrad's Models of Mind* (London and Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 87.

³⁷ Bruce Johnson, *Conrad's Models of Mind* (London and Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 87.

a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life would not be complete."³⁸ Pain has a purpose in a larger scheme of things, permitting one to notice and appreciate the genuine value of one's existence.

Streszczenie

Zgodnie z teorią Viktora Emila Frankla (przedstawioną głównie w książce pt. "Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu") istnieją trzy niezaprzeczalne rzeczywistości, które każdy człowiek musi "przeżyć", aby odkryć swoją autentyczną podmiotowość. Są nimi: ból (zarówno ten wewnętrzny jak i zewnętrzny), wina (obraz ludzkiej ułomności) oraz śmierć (obraz ludzkiego przemijania). I mimo tego, że te rzeczywistości są negatywne, wręcz tragiczne (z tego też powodu opisujemy je często hasłem tragiczna triada) mogą przekształcić się one w coś pozytywnego i twórczego. Artykuł podejmuje próbę przedstawienia tragicznej triady w kontekście egzystencjalnych zmagań Miltonowskiego Szatana (z eposu Raj Utracony) oraz Conradowskiego Kurtza (z noweli Jądro Ciemności). Są oni przedstawieni jako postaci, które nieustannie doświadczają udręki oraz poczucia winy pogłębionego faktem braku akceptacji ustalonego porządku rzeczy w boskim wszechświecie (Szatan) oraz zdrady wspaniałych ideałów kolonizacji Afryki (Kurtz). Ostatecznie doświadczają oni śmierci, zarówno fizycznej (Kurtz) oraz duchowej (Szatan). Jednakże moment ten - istotnie ważny dla obu postaci powoduje, że odkrywają oni swoją autentyczną podmiotowość. Pomimo różnic - Kurtz wypowiadając ostatnie słowa "zgroza, zgroza" akceptuje cały bagaż swojego zła oraz zbrodni, natomiast Szatan nigdy nie przyznaje się do błędu i nieustannie neguje Boga jako swojego Pana – obaj poprzez wejście w rzeczywistość tragicznej triady okrywają bolesną prawdę o sobie samych.

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³⁸ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2004), p. 88.

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