

*The Krakow Drama School turned into a hospital for one night: but what a hospital it was! Among the patients were Wisława Szymborska, Andrzej Wajda, the philosopher Professor Władysław Stróżewski, the actors Jan Nowicki and Anna Dymna, the doctor-musician Kuba Sienkiewicz, the art historian Professor Jacek Woźniakowski and Professor Andrzej Szczeklik, the raison d'être for the whole commotion.*

*Formally, the occasion for such an extraordinary event was the promotion of Professor Szczeklik latest book, **Katharsis**, published by Znak. Some of the guests discussed it with the author, seriously and insightfully, and yet with a great sense of humour.*

*The discussion, however, was just a prelude. A number of other guests turned up on the stage of the Drama School hall transformed into a hospital room (with props such as hospital beds, some medical apparatuses, and even a human skeleton) to pay tribute to Professor Szczeklik by song, dance or recital of light occasional verse.*

**“The Art That Heals”, *Dziennik Polski***

*Professor Szczeklik wrote his book in such a way that even I could understand it, although I never studied science. The beautiful thing about it are the mutual interrelations of various domains, both mythical and real. The ability to write this kind of essay is a true art. Medicine is an art, too, as book knowledge is not enough to understand another human being, what is required is the artist's gift of intuition.*

**Andrzej Wajda**

*Ancient Greeks used the word **Katharsis** in the sense of the cleansing of the body by medicine and of the soul by art. The word is to some degree mysterious. There is so much that we cannot access or begin to understand during our lifetime, that even though we do try, we can never grasp the mystery in its entirety. The word **Katharsis** conveys best in a nutshell what I attempted to deal with in the book.*

**Andrzej Szczeklik, the author**

**Andrzej Szczeklik interviewed by Małgorzata Borczak,  
*Nowe Książki***

*Q: Katharsis enables the reader an insight into two different personas of yours. On the one hand, it presents your opinions about the art of medicine, and on the other, reveals your taste for literature and shows you as a doctor and academic who values intuition very highly. Have you always found intuition so important?*

*A: I do value intuition highly, even though I would find it difficult to give its exact definition. The word, meaning ‘inspection’, has a Latin origin (from *intueri*, ‘to inspect’). Knowing this Latin root makes us understand the concept of intuition better. To me it is like an overpass over the rational mind, which enables one to get quick, often unexpected insights into the heart of the matter. ... I am sure that scientific research can be inspired by art. Art has the power to move us from the ruts we are stuck in, fill us with yearning for the sublime, imbue us with passion.*

*In English literature the tradition of scientists and physicians writing essays is very strong, perhaps the most distinguished name in this field being Lewis Thomas’s. By dint of the depth of thought, erudition and a sort of quiet reflection the essays by Andrzej Szczeklik remind me of Thomas’s writing. ...*

*One of most admirable feats of the book is the stunning ease with which the author presents some truly advanced scientific discoveries of the last years, comparing, for instance, the chaotic dynamics of non-linear systems describing the human heartbeat to Chopin’s rubato with its “subtle rhythmical anxiousness”. We knew, of course, that Chopin was in our hearts, but non-linear systems were a bit of a surprise. ...*

*Just as there is, and thank goodness for that, the writing of Ryszard Kapuściński to open our eyes to the problems of the world around us, Andrzej Szczeklik’s wise book opens our eyes to this world’s harmonies and discords.*

**“The heart’s rubato, the genome and the perennial pulse of medicine” *Tygodnik Powszechny***

*History of medicine, philosophy, physics and mathematics, scientific and ethical problems, music and art, anecdotes – the essays of the eminent Krakovian physician Andrzej Szczeklik brim with all these. They are essays about medicine which “touches the strongest of human desires”, the usually unfulfilled desire to love and be loved.*

*I will have Andrzej Szczeklik’s **Katharsis** at my bedside, in order to read from it not at night, but first thing in the morning, to rekindle the sense of living in a harmonious world.*

**Gazeta Wyborcza**

***Katharsis**, published by Znak, is the credo of a scientist and humanist. Wandering through the vast domain of medicine, making numerous excursions to its history, cultural contexts and the present condition, Szczeklik makes it clear that it is not his intention to argue with those who see medicine as no science. In his view medicine today becomes increasingly related to the latest developments in physics, but, since the doctor’s intuition is still indispensable, is by no means severed from its roots in magic.*

*According to Szczeklik, what is mysterious and hard to explain in medicine makes it akin to art. Both are connected by the concept of **Katharsis**, which in medicine means cleansing the patient of his illness and restoring him to regular life, and in art an evasively indefinable sensation aroused by the contact with a work of art.*

**Gazeta Wyborcza**

**Helena Zaworska “The Powerlessness of Body, the Power of Spirit”, *Nowe Książki***

The book by Professor Andrzej Szczeklik, a well-known physician, is an extraordinary, deeply moving read. It's amazing that a doctor working full-time in his clinic, a scientist conducting experiments in the lab, subjecting himself to various tests, keeping abreast with the latest discoveries in mathematics, physics, chemistry, microbiology and genetics, can also discuss with such passion and erudition the history of medicine and the history of art, mythology and poetry, ethics and psychotherapy. To boot, all his experiences, reflections and passions form a book of great intellectual and emotional import which is easy to read and keeps one interested from the beginning to the very end. I am sure I will re-read *Katharsis* many times.

The author's attitude is most direct, friendly, open and sincere, he talks to the reader instead of lecturing, he doesn't impose his own views, but rather invites the reader to go along with him in the quest for sources of spiritual strength in the face of suffering and pain, the powerlessness of the human body struck with illness. He is a doctor who believes in “the healing powers of nature and art” (as goes the subtitle of his book) and knows that recuperation from a serious illness and a narrow escape from death result in *Katharsis*, the cleansing of the soul, a sudden epiphany of life's invaluableity. While enjoying good health we tend to worry about anything and everything, to suffer compulsively and demonstratively, to find almost everything too hard to bear. Illness changes the proportions, “instead of many various roles, diverse objectives, we see the true sense of life”, we realise how many time and chances we have wasted. We could have cherished every moment, cultivated every joy, love and kindness, but instead we complained about everything and everyone. The narcissistic self, proud and hurting from complexes and harboured grudges, was time and again the source of pointless suffering.

A patient whose life is endangered must fight real pain. In this fight he can be helped by a doctor who knows that it is right for human beings to care for others and give as much as possible. In Szczeklik's words, “Thus medicine touches upon arguably the strongest of human desires, the desire to love and be loved.” Openness and receptiveness towards the other is the basis of every art and medicine is considered by the author as the art of healing

and the art of living. Love, in turn, he thinks to be the most important medicine for the pain of both body and soul, the surest foundation for spiritual balance.

Illness is one of the hardest and, at the same time, one of the most important and character-shaping human experiences. It is the touchstone of a person's spiritual potential, it proves the sufferer either resigned and apprehensive or resolutely hopeful and brave. Countless cases confirm the unusual strength of the physically weak: the handicapped, the seriously ill, the victims of fate. Compared to them, the eternally disgruntled healthy people seem losers. The doctor's task is not limited to healing the body; he is also a faithful partner in the battle for spiritual heroism. Szczeklik's book shows the greatness of those who have not yielded to illness, who have understood the mystery of pain. Witold Gombrowicz, a writer of uncommonly keen intelligence, realised only during the last months of his long illness, to his surprise and regret, that in his work there was almost nothing about pain, a basic human experience. He wanted to make amends for this thoughtless omission, but didn't live to do it.

The medicine of today, proud of the discoveries in microbiology and genetics, claims to be a science with the power to change man's life. The author duly notes these achievements and presents them accessibly (inasmuch as this is at all possible), but is far from exulting in them as many geneticists tend to do. He writes with a touch of irony, "The genome has been talked about in the most bombast metaphors. It has been called the bible of creation, the book of man, the recipe for life, the manual of evolution, the code of nature, the Holy Grail and the language of God. And the decoding of the genome was likened to 'the splitting of the atom, the moon landing, the achievements of Galileo, Shakespeare and Rembrandt, and the invention of the wheel.'" But genes constitute barely 2% of human DNA and can be compared to oases scattered throughout a desert. And what may this overwhelmingly immense desert be? "Research into the history of the genome will perhaps explain this mystery some day". Andrzej Szczeklik writes a lot about the limits of scientific knowledge. They do exist and are now more evident than ever: "The effectiveness of mathematical logic was undermined by Goedel's theorem. Physicists dream about some ultimate theory which would unite two separate worlds governed by different laws: the classical world of mechanics, exact and geometrical, and the world of quanta, non-determined and probabilistic".

However, Szczeklik is far from underestimating science (after all, he used to risk his own health to test new medicines). It is just that he sees not merely its achievements, but also dangers and ethical usurpations. The doctor's job is to protect life: not only that of the body, but also that of the soul: "Science, preoccupied with other issues, does not care for spiritual life, while contemporary culture has no idea whatsoever what that is, and so they both destroy it". This sentence, so sad and so true, could serve as the book's motto. In writing *Katharsis*, the author opposed this commonly accepted state of affairs which deprives people of their personality and scorns personal choices of values. Science does not answer "why" and "what for" questions, it is only interested in the "how".

The analogy between the structure and rhythm of the universe and the rhythms of man's life has been pondered by philosophers and doctors for millennia. Hippocrates understood illness as "a beauty-wrecking mess, the removal of which is the task of the physician" and called medicine an art. Paracelsus, a famous sixteenth-century medicine wizard, cured eighteen kings and princes after their doctors had given up. He held a doctorate from the university of Ferrara, it is true, but he learned the secret art of healing from barber-surgeons, smiths, Gypsies and old women. He practised his art in many countries and everywhere there were stars overhead in whose power he strongly believed.

Today we try to divine our future fate from genes, rather than the stars. However, even the best medical experts gathered at conferences often cannot pinpoint the source of an illness, for instance to come up with a definitive definition of asthma, even though centuries ago Homer described its symptoms in Hector's fall at the walls of Troy, "in terrible suffocation". Andrzej Szczeklik gives abundant examples of knowledge through art. What is admirable is not only his erudition, but also a talent for choosing the right works, quotations or images for given medical problems. A beautiful illustration of this gift is the comparison of Hamlet's conversation with Polonius about the passing clouds with the diagnosis of an illness with varying symptoms. As the same cloud is perceived in turns as a camel, a weasel and a whale, so one illness often allows of very different diagnoses.

Just as a talented artist can grasp the essence of a thing in a flash of inspiration, so a Great Doctor can have the perfect ear for medicine and be able to assess the patient's state and choose the cure perfectly right at all times. ...

The concept of *Katharsis* came into being at the early stages of Greek art, chorea, a mixture of dance, music, song and poetry. A treatise *On Music* from the 3rd century B.C. shows that the word shared its origin with medicine. Music healed by the purification of the soul. “Do not make me live without music”, sings a chorus of old men in Euripides. Today too, life without music would seem unbearable. And the necessity of enduring an illness without it, or facing the inexorability of death, would be cruel indeed. It seems obvious to us that music and therapy are related. A German count Keiserling who suffered from insomnia commissioned “sleeping music” from Johann Sebastian Bach! Bach’s favourite pupil Goldberg played to him a quiet, cheerful aria with thirty masterful variations on the harpsichord every night. The effect was wonderful. When we swallow sleeping pills nowadays, we are justified in feeling losers in the art of living.

It would be wrong not to mention the exceptional outward beauty of Professor Szczeklik’s book. Exquisite illustrations, a pretty typeface, velvety paper, care for the minutest detail – this art can be soothing too.