# Robert Lenkiewicz
## Human, All Too Human

Royal William Yard, Plymouth

3 — 28 June 2012

> Nothing is beautiful, only man: on this piece of naïvety rests all aesthetics, it is the *first* truth of aesthetics. Let us immediately add its second: nothing is ugly but *degenerate* man – the domain of aesthetic judgement is therewith defined.
>
> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), "*Expeditions of an Untimely Man*", aphorism 20

> Love of one is a piece of barbarism: for it is practised at the expense of all others. Love of God likewise.
>
> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), "Maxims and Interludes", 63

Missing from the "little trinity" of heroes[1] – the artists Rembrandt and Michelangelo, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) – who inspired the youthful Lenkiewicz is Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965). Schweitzer was a German theologian and philosopher who became a medical missionary and founded a hospital at Lambaréné in Gabon in West Africa. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his ethical doctrine of 'Reverence for Life'. Robert read the popular paperbacks about Lambaréné as a boy growing up in the Jewish hotel in Cricklewood, London, run by his parents. For some time he considered training as a physician in order to join his hero there. He was dissuaded by the seven-year medical training period, though as he later remarked, "Schweitzer, the old bugger, only ever selected *female* assistants!".[2]

Speaking in 1997 of his motivations, Lenkiewicz stated: "there was truly a belief that it was possible to be an *artist-saint*. I was interested in ethics, of a certain way of behaving, and of being a painter at the same time. It was a daft notion but a very powerful one".[3] It strikes us as peculiar therefore that Nietzsche's work, which reviled the Christian elevation of pity to the highest virtue and relentlessly attacked the figure of the ascetic saint, should have sat so well with Lenkiewicz at that time. But the younger Robert saw few irreconcilable differences: "it never occurred to me that they [Nietzsche and Schweitzer] could be anything other than blood brothers. It seemed to me that one could make a *potpourri* out of absolutely anything."

Lenkiewicz habitually took as his subjects those whom Nietzsche sometimes referred to as "the herd" or "the bungled and botched" or, when in a more generous mood, as "human, all-too-human". Nietzsche's first properly philosophical book, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), is called *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* in the original German. Nietzsche drew out the root meaning: "the word *Mensch* [man] ... means 'the measurer'"[4]. Nietzsche was writing in the wake of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and he saw that he was living through a time of spiritual crisis in Europe. Henceforth, man would be forced to accept that he had evolved from apes and had no privileged place in Nature, no sustaining relationship with a divine law-giver. As he famously proclaimed in 1882: "GOD IS DEAD."

Nietzsche feared that as the values which had previously been thought to derive from God evaporated, nihilism (the negative belief that life was without intrinsic value) would fill the vacuum. Instead, he called for man to accept his role as "the measure of all things". But those new man-made (*menschlich*) values would necessarily be judgements of *taste*, rather than divine absolutes: "the first step in logic is the judgment, the nature of which, according to the decision of the best logicians, consists in belief. *At the bottom of all belief lies the sensation of the pleasant or the painful in relation to the sentient subject.*"[5]

*Human, All Too Human* is usually seen as a transitional work lacking the full depth and force of the publications which were to follow, such as *The Joyful Wisdom* (1882), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–85), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Nietzsche's rightly famous doctrines – "God is dead", the "will to power", "the *Übermensch* (Overman)", the "eternal recurrence of the same", "beyond good and evil", the "transvaluation of all values" – all belong to the later works. But the book does make a clarion call to the "free spirits" with the strength to move "beyond good and evil" and create the "joyful wisdom" that was necessary:

---

1 See the aesthetic note "How Heavy is a Childhood Load?" on display in the east gallery.

2 Lecture on "Rembrandt and Aesthetics" delivered at the Plymouth Medical Society, March 1990.

3 Manuscript for *R.O. Lenkiewicz* (1997). All quotes by Lenkiewicz, unless otherwise indicated, are from this source.

4 *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Part 2, 'The Wanderer and His Shadow,' 21.

5 *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Part 18, 'Fundamental Questions of Metaphysics'; my italics.

> *Onwards*. And so onwards along the path of wisdom, with a hearty tread, a hearty confidence! However you may be, be your own source of experience! Throw off your discontent about your nature; forgive yourself your own self, for you have in it a ladder with a hundred rungs, on which you can climb to knowledge.[6]

The conviction that ethics – judgements regarding good and evil – were in fact disguised judgements of *taste* (aesthetics) is what Lenkiewicz as a young man took from Nietzsche: "I was very interested in relating ethics to aesthetics, even at that time. I remember using this phrase all the time: 'The only difference is the difference; the only difference is the difference' to avoid value judgements. But that difference was *aesthetic*."

Lenkiewicz is justly admired for his philanthropic activities with the vagrants and street alcoholics who populated his London studios and then his homes in Plymouth. "I thought it was a right and honourable thing to do that if I was going to be painting about people and in some way about the human condition then I should *live* in it – even if I created it somewhat theatrically around me, which is what I did." But in their company Lenkiewicz was observing at first hand "human physiology in a state of crisis", particularly in their experiences of withdrawal from alcohol. These were men who, according to Robert, "would cut your throat for another drink."

It took Lenkiewicz some time, but he began to suspect that, in matters of love, human beings were operating in the same way as alcoholics, and that intense feelings tended to isolate them rather than bring them closer together. The turning point was the *Jealousy Project*, shown in 1977. His key insight was that the physiological anxieties experienced by a jealous lover were in no way different to those experienced by the street alcoholics and addicts experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Hence, "the experience of jealousy is the experience of being withdrawn from one's own addiction, from one's own drug, that one has inflicted on oneself – nothing to do with the other person ... and that infliction, that process, that peculiar suicide, is an *aesthetic* phenomenon entirely."[7]

Lenkiewicz noted that "the curious nature of human affection seems structured in such a way that when it has 'committed' itself to one other person it simply refuses to see the rest."[8] He coined a term for this – *aesthetic fascism*:

> My consciousness of what I call "aesthetic fascism" came through a study of aspects of human relationships, the way people behave with each other, become dependent on each other. The notion then expanded: well hang on, if they're quite interested in each other (or think they are), and become addicted or preoccupied with that, *then why don't they do the same with ideas*? I began looking at the arts, at ideologies and belief systems, theological and political persuasions, from ... a physiologically aesthetic point of view.

Dr Philip Stokes recorded Robert's mature formulation of these ideas during a visit to the painter's studio in 1990: "[A visitor to the gallery] asked Robert what his overall objective for all his studies was; to which he replied, '*An investigation of the origins of fascism by enquiring into obsessional behaviour in all its forms.*' I'd never heard him speak in just those terms, and sensed it as important."[9]

Lenkiewicz wrote in his diary in February 1990: "the lover embraces the world; the fascist embraces the individual". The painter had arrived at the endpoint which Albert Schweitzer, as a philosopher, had himself sought – a universal 'ethics' but one transposed out of the metaphysical world of morality and into the scientific one of physiology:

> I think a time will come when, in a humane and unsentimental way, aesthetics will have its day, and that *all* human impulses will be regarded simply as a matter of taste ... I am wondering if there is any significant difference between our attraction for a human being, or a painting by Rembrandt, or an attraction towards theology. They all have in common a physiologically based aesthetic response to the business of living and as long as we remain uninformed this is relegated to metaphysical terms like "ethics" and "the good".[10]

*An essay exploring Nietzsche's influence on Lenkiewicz can be found on our website at www.lenkiewiczfoundation.org*

---

6 *Human, All Too Human* (1878), aphorism 292.

7 From the transcripts of recorded conversations with the artist by Dr Philip Stokes, Volume II, p.62.

8 Lenkiewicz, "Love & Romance: A Note" (1975).

9 From the transcripts of recorded conversations with the artist by Dr Philip Stokes, Volume III, p.78.

10 Lecture on "Rembrandt and Aesthetics" delivered at the Plymouth Medical Society, March 1990.