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Natalia de Barbaro, *Czuła przewodniczka. Kobięca droga do siebie (A Tender Guide: A Woman's Way to Herself)*, Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Agora, 2021, pp. 248

Czuła przewodniczka. Kobięca droga do siebie (A Tender Guide: A Woman's Way to Herself) was published by Agora, a Warsaw-based publishing house, in 2021. Not long after its release on the Polish market, it became a 'reading phenomenon,' which speaks to its popularity (heightened presence on Facebook, on social forums, in the media, etc.). The book was authored by Natalia de Barbaro, a psychologist, coach, social skills trainer, poet and a columnist for widely read magazines, such as *Wysokie Obcasy* and *Charaktery*. She runs her own workshops for women. Drawing on her previous professional experience working with women, she produced a book with women in mind. The title itself may suggest that it is a how-to book whose aim is to offer support to women as they seek a way to self-discovery. How-to books and their thematic concerns form part of the counselling trend, and research on them has been undertaken and reported in the literature by researchers such as Alicja Kargulowa, Elżbieta Siarkiewicz, Bogusław Śliwerski, Daria Zielińska-Pękał, Edyta Zierkiewicz and others (Kargulowa, 2005; Kargulowa, 2012; Kargulowa, 2013; Kargulowa, 2019; Siarkiewicz, 2003; Siarkiewicz, 2010; Śliwerski, 2015; Zielińska-Pękał 2019a; Zielińska-Pękał, 2019b; Zierkiewicz, 2004; Zierkiewicz, 2011; Zierkiewicz, 2016).

De Barbaro's book is 249 pages long. It is divided into three parts, which are themselves split into smaller subchapters. Each of these parts is followed by a few blank pages for readers to make their own notes, which can give them a sense that they have made the book even more personal and intimate. De Barbaro furnished her book with a preface titled 'From the Author,' a prologue 'A Dream of Laced-up Women' and an epilogue titled 'A Bow.' She relies mainly on her personal experiences, which makes her more authentic in the eyes of her readers. She invites women to take 'a journey into themselves' and thus discover feminine wisdom within themselves. Although De Barbaro repeatedly refers to scholarly research, her book does not contain either footnotes (the only footnotes come from the editors) or a bibliography. There are also references to numerous works of art and literature (poetry,

fiction, films and songs), which are not listed in the book's sources either. For example, I could not locate any direct reference to Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Lecture titled 'The Tender Narrator' (Tokarczuk, 2018), which is echoed in the book's title. Tokarczuk began her speech on a very personal note by recalling: '[M]y mother (...) gave me something once known as a soul, thereby furnishing me with the world's greatest *tender narrator*' (Tokarczuk 2018, p. 2, italics original). The two authors call the inner voice differently, but they describe it as tender and underscore its presence in everybody's life. However, De Barbaro does not mention the Nobel laureate's talk in her book, in this way omitting an extremely important reference. Importantly, Tokarczuk defined tenderness in her lecture, describing it as, among other things, 'the most modest form of love' (Tokarczuk 2018, p. 24). Although across her book De Barbaro repeatedly emphasises that to find one's way to oneself is to love oneself, she does not explain what the tenderness foregrounded in the title actually is in her view. According to Tokarczuk, the tender narrator can be considered a 'miraculous and significant' figure (Tokarczuk, 2018, p. 21). She defines it specifically as 'a point of view, a perspective from where everything can be seen' (Tokarczuk, 2018, p. 21). According to Tokarczuk, stories should be told honestly to the reader in a way 'that activates a sense of the whole in the reader's mind, that sets off the reader's capacity to unite fragments into a single design, and to discover entire constellations in the small particles of event' (Tokarczuk 2018, p. 22). So literature is supposed to convey and foster a broader, multidimensional view. This quality that is not to be found in De Barbaro's book, because the image she draws of women, of problem-solving strategies and of finding one's way to oneself is rather one-dimensional, narrow and subjective to the point of precluding readers' own reflection and interpretation. This is not conducive to finding one's own way of knowing or loving oneself. Readers are not even able to clearly deduce from the book who the eponymous guide is. She is referred to as an inner voice. But what is this voice?

The starting point of De Barbaro's reflections is the fear of rejection and the assumption that finding her own 'inner guide' can help every woman to love herself and to get rid of this fear.

The prologue to the book recounts De Barbaro's dream in which she sees women swimming in an underground body of water; the women are wearing dresses with laced-up bodices and are stopped from swimming out by a man. The text of the prologue also includes De Barbaro's statement of her mission to help other women liberate themselves from everything that causes discomfort in their lives, blocks their needs and makes it difficult for them to love themselves.

In the first part of the book, De Barbaro identifies and analyses three types of women that embody certain behaviours and attitudes of women. The types are the Meek Woman, the Snow Queen and the Female Martyr. In De Barbaro's distinction, the Meek Woman seeks to satisfy the needs of those around her, takes care of their well-being and is submissive and fearful. She does not know any other way to act, so she submits to everyone around her. The Snow Queen is a woman who systematically

sets requirements for herself, aims high and is ambitious. Characteristically perfectionist, she does not show her emotions. De Barbaro's last type, the Female Martyr, assumes multiple responsibilities and undertakes plentiful activities, most of which do not give her pleasure. Parading her exhaustion and thus inducing guilt in others, the Female Woman tends to sacrifice herself for others, but puts her torment and hurt at the centre of things. De Barbaro argues that these three characters are part of every woman. Additionally, she says that no single, unchanging type dominates, but there is rather a constant shuffling of them. In her view, which particular type takes the floor depends on the situation and the emotions felt. De Barbaro identifies and depicts the types of women on the basis of her own reflections and experience working with other women, but readers do not find out with how many women she has actually worked, or on what basis she has distinguished these types. Nor do readers learn whether any other types of women exist or not. No research has been carried out in this area to substantively justify the author's position.

In the second part, De Barbaro presents what she believes to be essential tips to facilitate the journey of finding one's way to oneself and loving oneself. This part is replete with vague and cryptic advice, which is worded in phrases such as: 'Everything is as it is meant to be,' 'Find the Girl that lives inside,' 'Listen to the quiet teachers. Make room for them to speak to you,' 'Look for questions,' 'Others are struggling too,' 'You are not alone' and 'Everything is OK with you.' De Barbaro discusses each of these tips, illustrating them with artistic works. However, at the end, she marshals two specific tasks which she urges as the fundamental tasks of every woman's 'inner guide.' These are 'stitching together what has come unstitched' and 'searching for the Ghostess.' The former has to do with childhood, one's relationships with one's parents, rejections one may have experienced and a possibly unmet desire for love. De Barbaro argues that ideal relationships with parents and caregivers do not exist, that everyone loves their child as much as they can, and that readers should try and perceive this love in the smallest gestures and words. At the same time, as an adult, a woman can herself notice what caused her grief and the trauma she has experienced, go back to it, relive those emotions and 'heal herself.' Unfortunately, De Barbaro does not warn readers that revisiting one's difficult past experiences on one's own may not only fail to help one, but also do one harm and trigger even worse consequences. She does not mention professional counselling, which can provide psychotherapy for such people (Corey 2005). In the latter task, readers are told to look for their own 'Ghostess' who will guide them through life and support them when needed. Talking about the 'Ghostess,' De Barbaro has in mind every individual's distinctive spirituality. She elucidates that the search for and definition of one's 'God' are a constantly changing and individual issue. She insists that however one's own spirituality is understood, a woman should think that she is surrounded by an energy that favours her, is kind to her and surrounds her with boundless love. This spirituality aims to help the 'Tender Guide,' or the inner voice of every woman, on her journey to living in harmony with herself.

The third part of the book describes what helps, in De Barbaro's view. As she claims, taking care of oneself can help one see one's inner child, who is sometimes hurt, hungry, thirsty or tired. Taking care of oneself, she says, can be a prelude to improved well-being and a better understanding of one's needs. It can also help one move on from the 'Meek' type and see a 'Wild Girl' in oneself who wants to be slightly crazy and spontaneous, wants to have fun, to develop her passions, to live her own way, to think and do what she wants and to show her emotions, without considering other people's opinion. Subsequently, De Barbaro outlines the transformation of the 'Snow Queen' type of woman into an 'Adult', that is, leaving behind a woman lost in her own expectations and not showing her emotions in order to become a more conscious being, finding balance in life. De Barbaro also depicts the 'Warm-hearted' type of woman that replaces the 'Martyr Woman' as a repaired and reworked version of her. In this section of the book, the author emphasises not only the need to define boundaries and to take care of one's inner child, but above all the need to pay special attention to the lightness that can be achieved by letting go of certain things on which life does not hinge at the moment.

Although numerous sources (articles in the press, the media, social networks, reviews on the Internet) refer to De Barbaro's book as a how-to book due to the prevalence of the colloquial style and the author's numerous reflections, attributing the self-help function to it is not really warranted. Abundant digressions, metaphors and references to artworks and dreams may produce a sense of confusion and distraction. Readers may be led to consider their dreams to be a guide in their lives, something that the author does not warn against. Although the publisher's description includes a list of questions correlated with certain types of problems that will be addressed, answers to these questions are not clearly given in the book itself. This can cause some confusion for readers, and this confusion may only deepen when they seek support in the issues that bother them. In addition, a chaos that pervades the content of the book from its very beginning can be a considerable hindrance. The chaos is caused by an incoherent proliferation of references to the author's own experiences, works of art, research literature and other sources, which are evoked without any apparent order. Although the book is written in a simple and accessible language, it may seduce with the promise of solving one's problems and eventually prove incomprehensible.

Moreover, although the book is designed for women whose lives full of duties with a small admixture of joy, the image of the woman that the book paints appears as a skewed critique. Upon closer scrutiny, *A Tender Guide* turns out to portray women in a stereotypical manner, ascribing to them roles that seem to be grievously outdated in the modern world. The advertising slogan, touting the book as a publication that every woman should read in order to find her way to herself, is rather off the mark. A deeper analysis shows that the book omits women who are independent and strong, who have a solid sense of self-worth, and who succeed solely by using their inner resources and through their determination.

What comes to the fore in the first part, where De Barbaro characterises selected types of women, is their classification on the basis of her own subjective experiences and memories. One can repeatedly feel that the selected themes or problems are deliberately highlighted in order to show her own person in this. Bogusław Śliwerski writes that a fair proportion of how-to books are autobiographical and memoir-like. He observes that their authors tend to be strong personalities who are bent on bringing the importance of their own achievements into the lives of others through this channel (Śliwerski, 2015, p. 199). Indeed, De Barbaro portrays the types of women who fight their inner battle every day and convinces her readers that her observations are so appropriate, universal and valid that they apply to all women.

De Barbaro devotes the second and third parts to guidelines and advice on how women can listen to their inner voice (perhaps it is all about intuition) and how to accomplish the process of transformation leading to self-love. Part two heavily relies on the language of persuasion, manifest in the words 'find,' 'seek,' 'listen,' and 'do.' There are many suggestions, such as how many types of women the author believes there may be. Perhaps there are more than the ones she enumerates. The suggestions and simplifications on which De Barbaro falls back may make the readers reflect, but this is guided reflection that does not promote readers' own interpretive effort, does not enable them to define their individual type of woman and does not help them see the issues from a broader perspective than the one shown by the author.

The third chapter has given me the impression that the book is addressed to readers who fall within what Kargulowa has called the *homo consultans* type (Kargulowa 2019). One reason is that such readers look for advice in a medium such as a book, rather than seeking a face-to-face encounter with a specialist. There is no classic counsellor-client relationship here (Kargulowa 2019, p. 309). The book combines scholarly content (without indicating its sources) and common knowledge, throwing the author's own experiences and feelings into the mix. Readers are, so to speak, 'attacked' with advice, information and depictions of women types, and therefore confusion may be triggered by the plethora of various content, tips, references to artistic works, etc. (Kargulowa 2019, p. 309). As *homo consultans* looks for immediate relief and quick-fix solutions to his/her problem, s/he needs straightforward advice, preferably if it is pleasant to read, which is what De Barbaro's book offers by its various concrete tips and suggestions described in a simple and accessible language (Kargulowa 2019, p. 313). The author does not propose any individual approach to readers in her book. This is exemplified in the generalised description of the types of women, which do not contribute to the message of individualised advice developed for the distinct, unique and one-of-her-kind person that every woman is.

Analysing in detail the content of selected passages in De Barbaro's chapters two and three, one can discern in them a multiplicity of psychological concepts, specialists' insights and a wealth of themes that introduce scientific knowledge. However, because the sources of sources of these concepts, insights and knowledge are not cited, readers cannot check the reliability of the information provided. Śliwerski

argues that 'In the global, postmodern world, knowledge has become a commodity which, irrespective of its components (creative or popular investment), is advertised as "a bestseller," the reputation confirmed by the printing run and the alleged sales figures' (Śliwerski, 2015, p. 197). But these are not works produced as a result of long-term research, intellectual explorations, constructed in accordance with the research methodology of projects of investigating the truth about the actual reality of interest to the authors. Śliwerski points out that well-selling guides to 'living' tend to feature incoherent and sometimes contradictory content 'catering to hodgepodge tastes and defy[ing] the standards of logic and scholarly knowledge' (Śliwerski 2015, p. 198). Some authors of such books do not have the proper training or competence in the subject matter they present. Consequently, common knowledge prevails in many how-to books. The authors' guidelines and advice are often founded on a common way of thinking, instead of drawing on scholarship. The content of the advice is developed on the basis of the authors' own experiences and observations, which only confirms Michał Rusinek's view that self-help books are the realm of believing (Rusinek, 2019, p. 428). Rarely anchored in proper research, they are sometimes complementary to scientific knowledge and sometimes contradict it. When they completely replace scholarship, they may be dangerous to people who follow their advice in their lives. The how-to books described by Rusinek contain alternative science and magical thinking, which can also be found De Barbaro's book. The content of self-help books often puts an amateur in the role of a professional. The examples cited in the chapters based on the authors' lives represent one and the same truth, thus replacing scholarly reasoning. The boundary between science and literature and between fact and fiction collapses (Rusinek, 2019, p. 431). How-to books do not encourage the use of professional counselling, and De Barbaro does not suggest that either to those who have unsuccessfully attempted to find their way to loving themselves, even though she has herself used therapy. She finds answers to her questions in artistic works (films, books, music, poetry). Zielińska-Pękał points out that referring to art is a non-literal form of providing counselling and considers this to be valuable inspiration (Zielińska-Pękał, 2019b, p. 187). Thus, De Barbaro encourages readers to search for answers to their questions in everyday reality and in art, but does not prompt them to use critical reflection in doing so, as urged in the literature by Mieczysław Malewski and Elżbieta Siarkiewicz (Malewski, 2010; Siarkiewicz, 2010). De Barbaro describes visits to, as she calls them, 'quasi-therapists' who profess to help her find herself, but she does not mention, following her example, that people's help should not be used without first verifying their knowledge and competence. She writes a lot about spirituality and abstract concepts, such as synchronicity, which may seem completely incomprehensible to people who have not experienced it. The many accounts of dreams treated as 'guides' can make readers overconfident in them, spark their confusion and, in the worst scenario, dissuade them from seeing themselves as critical agents capable of emancipation.

In conclusion, De Barbaro's book displays the features of texts described as self-help books. Firstly, it contains advice, recommendations and information. It also has the traits listed in Zielińska-Pękał's definition of a how-to book. Referring to artistic works, introducing metaphorical comparisons, quoting stories from life, posing questions (without answers) are devices that Zielińska-Pękał states typify the style of self help books (Zielińska-Pękał, 2019b, pp. 187–89). They also appear in De Barbaro's book, which fits the definition put forward by Zierkiewicz as well. In her historical account of the self-help book genre, Zierkiewicz explains that, generally, 'self-help books (...) contain step-by-step solutions to solving difficulties defined in their titles, and they are advertised as *the* solution to a given problem' (Zierkiewicz, 2016, p. 221). *A Tender Guide* also fulfils counselling objectives: it makes readers aware of the nature of their problems, provides ways to solve the problem and fosters the establishment of a para-social relationship resembling direct contact between the counsellor and the counselee (Zierkiewicz, 2004).

Important features of self-help books also include broad availability, easy use, cheapness and anonymity; notably, they are short-lived, that is, they do not requiring regular meetings with a specialist. Moreover, and crucially, they are informed by the author's intention to help the reading public (Zierkiewicz 2016, p. 222). Although De Barbaro assures each of her readers that she is building a counselling relationship and reaching out towards them in order to help them find their way to themselves and unites with them by acknowledging that this task is a shared one, in the course of a 'literary journey,' it is clearly possible to read this how-to book as a promise to solve the problems readers experience, as a promise that one can change one's 'imperfect' life by following one's own experiences and emotions. Because *A Tender Guide* is a popular science book, in my view, it cannot be a source on which all women can rely to find their way to themselves and self-love, which I have tried to argue fairly in this review. Rusinek suggests that we should read how-to books as documents of our time, finding in them the sense of confusion and a distrust of science characteristic of today's reality. Looking critically at books such as this can yield conclusions that offer an answer to the question about how to cope and survive in the times of how-to books (Rusinek, 2019, p. 221).

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