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James Nikopoulos

Style, Volume 50, Number 2, 2016, pp. 121-138 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/sty.2016.0005

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James Nikopoulos
NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: This article reexamines the ethical dilemmas inherent to the aesthetics of Holocaust literature. Through close analysis of several of the Auschwitz stories of the Polish author Tadeusz Borowski, I show that the key to understanding the literature of witness lies in grasping the complicated way such fiction juxtaposes notions of *beauty* and *routine*. In its dramatization of the way forms of beauty resist the horrors of the concentration camp context, Borowski's stories rewrite dominant conceptions of beauty by, paradoxically, relying on age-old conceptions.
KEYWORDS: Borowski, Holocaust, beauty, witness, ethical criticism

Tadeusz Borowski frames his story "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)" as sections of a letter addressed to the narrator's sweetheart in the *Frauen Konzentration Kamp*. In the seventh part of the correspondence, we read that "There can be no beauty if it is paid for by human injustice" (*This Way* 132). Borowski's concentration camp stories dramatize the antithesis of this idea. To see how, let us begin with what Stendhal has to say on beauty, taken from his treatise on love and heartbreak, *De l'amour* (1822):

> You see to what extent *beauty* is necessary if love is to be born. Ugliness must not present an obstacle. The lover will soon come to see beauty in his mistress whatever she looks like, without giving a thought to *real beauty*. (58)

What such a statement says is that the beauty to be found in love does not transcend the particularity of beloved. How does Stendhal know this?—because *ugliness* does not present itself as an obstacle.

Style, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2016.

In the last section of the Auschwitz letter Borowski's narrator runs into "an old pal" from his previous labor gang, and he asks him, "What's new . . . personally?" That is, he is not asking what he has been doing on a daily basis—"What sort of 'personally' is there for me?" the pal responds. "The oven, the barracks, back to the oven"—but whether there is anything meaningful about his private life to report (142). How could there be? As he says, "Have I got anybody around here?" (142). Nonetheless, if you really want to know . . . "we've figured out a new way to burn people . . ."

> you take four little kids with plenty of hair on their heads, then stick the heads together and light the hair. The rest burns by itself and in no time at all the whole business is *gemacht*. (142)

Our narrator offers his congratulations—albeit "with very little enthusiasm"—and the pal bursts into laughter: "Listen, doctor, here in Auschwitz we must entertain ourselves in every way we can. Otherwise, who could stand it?" (142). This statement is so troubling because it presupposes that entertainment can be had no matter how obtrusively ugliness is looming nearby as an obstacle. Borowski's narrator is disgusted by this sentiment because, as he says in the story's final lines, "this is a monstrous lie, a grotesque lie, like the whole camp, like the whole world" (142). What this exchange has just dramatized is an aesthetic moral: Certain forms of ugliness *must* present an obstacle. In particular, we are dealing with the supreme form of ugliness that is human injustice, which, as Borowski's narrator writes, cannot be distorted into that which it is not: "There can be no beauty if it is paid for by human injustice."

You will have noticed that I am not distinguishing the enjoyment of beauty from other forms of aesthetic pleasure, in this case, laughter. For the purposes of this discussion, beauty will function as an umbrella term that denotes aspects of a phenomenon that catalyze an emotional response, which is appreciated as aesthetic. By *emotional* I mean an experience that implicates the entire body in cognition, as tears or laughter, into anxiety or mirth. By *aesthetic* I mean the potential of something to be positively valenced transcendentally. The aesthetic response is a personal formalizing of beauty such that it *could* be replicated as a positive experience for others and for oneself, whatever the context. By a *positive experience*, we mean the ex post facto belief that the event's experience was worthwhile, and thus, worth repeating (i.e., as an emotional experience).

The *could* of this desire does not mean you expect the aesthetic experience to be replicable forever and always in the same way for yourself or for others. It merely denotes your desire to hypothetically place your experience again into the crucible of aesthetic judgment. Contingency is understood even as a leap into universality is implied. For no aesthetic judgement occurs in a vacuum—no text read or painting beheld outside the influence of memory, prejudice, and situation. At the same time, beauty demands it be understood as form, which is why it is always understood as a judgement *to* something. And its complicity derives from this. That one would wish to relive an emotional response to cheerful and disquieting stories alike may only be a supposition, not a demand, but it is a supposition that oftentimes makes profound demands on our morals. For though a supposition is "only" uncertain, it is nonetheless something that takes on the imperiousness of belief.

For Borowski, whose stories aim to produce an aesthetic experience for readers from the horrors of his own past, there is something ghastly about such attenuated bullying. Borowski's work asks its readers to examine the extent to which beauty can be paid for with injustice. It does this through the interplay of two themes that feed off each other: *complicity* and *routine*. We are speaking of the way routine magnifies injustice by regularizing it, and the paradoxical way the regularity of horror can also dramatize the potential for beauty to be rendered routine. All of this comes out in Borowski's stories because of the way they emphasize our complicity in the exchange we consumers of entertainment share in the buying and selling of beauty with injustice.

COMPLICITY

When Borowski's narrator rejects his pal's assumption that all forms of entertainment are licit in Auschwitz, he is objecting to the extraction of aesthetic pleasure from horror. Alexander Nehemas' definition of aesthetic pleasure is pertinent: "a pleasure we take in things *just as they stand before us*, without regard to their effects on our sensual, practical, or moral concerns" (4–5).[1] Borowski's stories have little patience for the art-for-art's-sake sentiment of the second part of this statement. If pleasure is produced by things that stand before us, *just as they are*, how can we maintain no regard for their effects on our sensual, practical, and—most important for our topic—moral concerns? Is not this the lie the narrator is pointing to when he condemns his old pal's justification of entertainment?

Borowski's art is predicated on the notion that the pleasure it produces can have no validity if it is not derived from things *just as they stand before us*. This is where the complicity that haunts its narrators' voices comes from. "The first duty of Auschwitzers is to make clear just what a camp is," Borowski once wrote, "But let them not forget that the reader will unfailingly ask: But how did it happen that *you* survived?" (Kott 22). His stories answer that question directly: You survive through your integration into a certain aspect of the camp's routine. "Trucks drive around, load up lumber, cement, people—a regular daily routine," Borowski writes in "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" (*This Way* 34). Borowski's narrators are the laborers who help shuffle these people to their deaths. Thus, his narrators have all become part of the structure of punishment, and thus, part of the camp's exercise of power.

Which is why there is so much emphasis in Borowski's stories on movement. Movement dramatizes the routine of horror when it is denuded of its most promising connotation: the future. For those who move along are of course those headed to their deaths. The most direct dramatization of this idea comes in the story "The People Who Walked On," in which two forms of routine are depicted in a monstrously ironic form of coexistence: that of the narrator and his fellow workers in the labor gangs who settle into camp life by building a soccer field and planting vegetables, and that of the prisoners who are sent immediately to their deaths along the roads that run alongside the narrator's makeshift home. The ceremony of survival and extermination has achieved the status of the everyday: "Each day was just like another. People emerged from the freight cars and walked on—along both roads" (*This Way* 97).

To have become part of this routine is to have become part of its injustice.[2] In "This Way for the Gas . . ." the narrator speaks with the "fat Frenchman" Henri about all the goods they will acquire as a result of a recent load of prisoners. They have been eating pretty well this whole time, but they ask themselves what will happen if they run out of prisoners. After all, "All of us live off what they bring" (31). And such a statement, right before we read of the human beings mired in excrement and starvation in the moments before their execution. The consequences of this kind of participation are damning. It is not just that you do what you are forced to do, or that you move out of the way willingly. It is that the mechanics of camp life make your survival dependent on the deaths of others. The easiest way

to relieve you of your hate, says Henri, "is to turn against someone weaker" (40). In other words, the easiest way to retain your humanity is to unload a portion of the injustice you have accumulated as part of this economy of hatred.

The complicity of the camp laborers derives from their position along this continuum of injustice. Borowski's stories stress this over and again, this idea that domination plays itself out most subtly by making its victims active participants in a routine of further victimization. The only recourse available for our narrator if he wants to survive is to take part in the horrors around him. Which means that the only relief from his complicity can come through erasure. "Go on, go on, vanish!" screams out the narrator of "This Way for the Gas . . ." in perhaps his most exasperated moment (43). By insisting that these people hurry along until they are out of sight, can the narrator retain some vestige of humanity, or is this the sign that he has lost it completely? The irony of course is that in his telling of this story, he keeps the exterminated from vanishing. "For a day may come when it will be up to us to give an account of the fraud and mockery to the living—to speak up for the dead" says the narrator in "Auschwitz, Our Home . . ." (115–16). A day will come when they will have to describe what the narrator describes in the ensuing two paragraphs, how trucks of naked women were marched to their death right before the eyes of those who survived, how these thousands stretched out their hands pleading for help, and how "Not one of us made a move, not one of us lifted a hand" (116).

There is more, though. Borowski's stories attach the stigma of complicity to multiple forms of survival, as much to the presence of a living human being surviving Auschwitz, as to a form of human culture not lost to despair. Borowski's work highlights the way the complicity inherent to both forms of survival has less to do with guilt and all to do with an ideal of truth. There is a kind of journalistic responsibility invoked in lines like the following, taken from "Auschwitz, Our Home . . .":

> The women who share your bunk must find my words rather surprising. 'You told us he was so cheerful. And what about this letter? It's so full of gloom!' And probably they are a little bit shocked. But I think that we should speak about all the things that are happening around us. We are not evoking evil irresponsibly or in vain, for we have now become a part of it. (113)

Can evil ever be evoked irresponsibly or innocuously if what you describe actually happened? The true danger of evoking evil "in vain" lies in depriving it of its utility. If it is irresponsible to evoke evil "in vain," we must ask what fruitful result does a responsible evocation produce.

This is where the relationship between the work of art we are reading and the forms of art depicted in the stories seems to part ways. According to the aforementioned statement, the stories themselves are part of the survivor's responsibility. Evil is never evoked irresponsibly if it is spoken of truthfully. And in order for its depiction to be truthful, the complex mechanisms that allow evil to function routinely must not be simplified and thereby rendered innocuous. At the same time, to turn this routine of horror into a work of art is to aestheticize it, to grant it the aspiration of achieving beauty, and of doing so by molding the human injustice that is the ugliness of the camp's reality. This implies that the story itself is its own monstrous lie. Not just a lie, but irresponsible too, considering that Borowski is so bent on dramatizing the problematic ways forms of beauty coexist with a world of atrocity. Irresponsible because such stories turn the whims of human misfortune into the poetry of man's perennial opposition to fickle turns of fate. Why shouldn't such a thing be thought of as beautiful, even if it is irresponsible?[3]

BEAUTY AND CAMP LIFE

Let us see where the stories themselves problematize beauty when it creeps into the vicinity of injustice. In "This Way for the Gas . . ." a young woman wants to know what's to happen to her. So she asks, "'Listen, tell me, where are they taking us?'"

> I look at her without saying a word. *Here*, standing before me, is a girl, a girl with enchanting blonde hair, with beautiful breasts, wearing a little cotton blouse, a girl with a wise, mature look in her eyes. *Here* she stands, gazing straight into my face, waiting. And *over there* is the gas chamber: communal death, disgusting and ugly. And *over in the other direction* is the concentration camp. (44)[4]

It all seems so simple, as though all it takes is a little movement from here to there to destroy forever that which is beautiful. There seems to be something grotesquely false about such a beautiful young woman's presence in *this* place. In the Polish this falsity comes across even more emphatically

through Borowski's repeated use of *oto*: "*Oto* stoi" ("Here she stands"); "*Oto* komora gazowa" ("over there is the gas chamber"); "*Oto* obóz" ("over in the other direction is the concentration camp") (*Pożegnanie z Marią* 97). In this paragraph, *oto* is more akin to a word like the French *voici* than to any English adverb of place. Whereas the English emphasizes a distinction in space, the Polish makes this distinction more of a qualitative one, as if to say, *both* this beautiful woman and this gas chamber, *both* this beauty and this death stand before me now, as if to say, there is something very wrong with this pairing.[5]

We find a similar sentiment expressed by the episode of Mirka's child in "The People Who Walked On." We know of Mirka, because a Jew in the narrator's *Kommando* is so devoted to this woman that he is always trying to buy her eggs, since he knows she likes them. He wraps his treasure in something soft and tosses it over the fence to her. We know of this woman, because one time she calls the narrator over in desperation. Maybe he can help with this child lying right there between the cots, dying. What should she do? The narrator cannot help but be struck by the child's beauty. Notice Mirka's exasperation:

> The child was asleep, but very restless. It looked like a rose in a golden frame—its burning cheeks were surrounded by a halo of blond hair.
>
> "What a pretty child," I whispered.
>
> "Pretty!" cried Mirka. "All you know is that it's pretty! But it can die any moment! I've had to hide it so they wouldn't take it to the gas! What if an S.S. woman finds it? Help me!" (89)

What is so monstrous to Mirka is that the narrator is contemplating this child like it were some cherub painted by Rafael, as though it were divorced from the reality of camp routine. But it is not. The child's entire existence is part of this routine, threatened both by murder and disease. Everything about what makes the child so pretty is a direct result of its ailment: "asleep but restless" because of its sickness; "like a rose in a golden frame" because the symptoms of its ailing have stamped these hues onto its "burning cheeks." Borowski argues over and again that the Auschwitz survivors' complicity derives from their presence within the mechanics of the camp's routine. In a similar vein, his stories show us that beauty does not emerge in moments here and there as angelic halos, isolated from the horrors around, but as part and parcel of the same complex structure of systematized slaughter.

One more example from the same story: one of the female camp's Block Elders, the redhead who moves from bunk to bunk trying to distract the women from their thoughts, even telling them to sing and to dance, even telling them to recite poetry, until she cannot take it any longer:

> One of the girls was standing on top of a table singing a popular tune. When she finished, the women in the bunks began to applaud. The girl bowed, smiling. The red-headed Elder covered her face with her rough hands. (91)

Why is it too much to bear? "'I can't stand it any longer!' she says, 'It's too disgusting!' . . . And suddenly she jumped up and rushed over to the table. 'Get down!' she screamed at the singer" (91). "Get down," because she is now ready to answer the question this young woman had asked her earlier:

> Your children, your husbands and your parents are not in another camp at all. They've been stuffed into a room and gassed! Gassed, do you understand? Like millions of others, like my own mother and father. They're burning in deep pits and in ovens. (91)

What is it about these attempts to survive that breaks her? Borowski's story forces us to question the independence of *bios* from *zoe* and *psuche*, or better yet, to ask which one is most dependent on the others for survival. Keep in mind, it was the Block Elder herself who recommended that the other women take up song. These two episodes dramatize the effect of beauty once it has been incorporated into a routine of inhumanity, as if to say there can be no notion of considering the beautiful as divorced from its monstrously inappropriate context. As if to say that reacting to beauty as though it were real beauty, the kind for which ugliness should present an obstacle, is inhumane.

OPOWIADANIA

In "Auschwitz, Our Home . . .," it seems beauty is not to be tolerated. It seems to have no place in this place. However, Borowski's narrator tells his beloved that it will be the survivors' responsibility "to speak about *all* the things that are happening." Only then, he says, will this evil not be evoked in vain, "for we have now become a part of it." It is this last clause that is the citation's most haunting. The author of these memories acts responsibly only if he

acknowledges everything about the horrors of the camp. All the horrors, not just the murder and the torture, but the way it damns the innocent too. All the horror, which includes what has been done to the very notion of beauty itself. What the horrors of camp life do to beauty is not so dissimilar to what they do to Borowski's narrators. By incorporating the narrators' and beauty's innocence into camp life, they incorporate this innocence into a routine of atrocity. We see what being incorporated into the mechanics of camp life does for the laborers: it keeps them alive, it keeps them busy, it keeps them entertained—all on the backs of the slaughtered. When beauty is incorporated into this same world, the implications for its innocence are just as damning.

Beauty, though, is stubborn. It demands that it be appreciated as an island cut off from the main. This is what exasperates the characters in the stories. This is why Mirka screams at our narrator, why the camp Elder does the same to the young woman taking a bow after her appearance. Because there is something so very out of place about these phenomena. We are *here* and all that beauty should be *there*, not *here*, in the same way a fat Frenchman and a Polish student who had never committed an act of violence before the war should not be willingly surviving off of the deaths of thousands of innocent people. That is the kind of thing reserved for monsters. They are from over *there*; they had never been part of *here*. Even if now they are part of everything in this *here*, should they not have been able to retain their *there*ness? Can beauty maintain itself as apart from this place once it is incorporated into the mechanics of the camp? How can you stand there and marvel at how "pretty" my baby is, Mirka is saying, when it could die at any moment? How can you smile and sing when your entire family was just gassed?

Hannah Arendt famously argued that what makes evil so extraordinary is how banal it can be. Banality is about being so unimaginative as to become boring. When evil becomes boring, it is no longer evil, though; it is merely human. What about beauty? Can it be rendered a thing as unimaginative, as unextraordinary as to be merely human? No. No it cannot. At least not completely. Therein lies its damning complicity.

What exasperates Mirka and the redheaded Elder is not that beauty has retained its independence from the routine of the camp's horrors, but that this independence is itself dependent on this routine. This is not to say, in some horrific reformulation of Keats, that without the ugliness of the camp to stand in contrast, Mirka's baby would not be so pretty. It is that the

appreciation of the beautiful is a flight from banality . . . but not necessarily from ugliness. Beauty is not the antithesis or even the absence of ugliness; it is, in Stendhal's terms, the promise of happiness (*la promesse du bonheur*). Which is to say, what we are being promised is not just a positive emotional state, but also the potential to continue experiencing newness. "So long as we find anything beautiful," Nehemas writes, "we feel that we have not yet exhausted what it has to offer, and that *forward-looking* element is [. . .] inseparable from the judgment of beauty" (9). Beauty is *here* in that it is part of this ugliness, built out of this ugliness, and in being so, seems to contribute to this monstrous lie of human injustice. But beauty will always be *there*, because experiencing it is to experience promise, which is what *here* has been built up to destroy. There is no promise in banality; nothing so mundane ever has anything novel to offer.

What beauty does offer is what everything in the camps has been systematized to deny. The irony of any forward-looking element in the camps is profound, which is why Borowski's emphasis on movement is so powerful. Which is why moments of beauty in this theatre are so arresting: they allow its players to experience an idea of the future as promise rather than as irony. One wonders what is so problematic about this. Is it so wrong to retain hope as so many are marched to their deaths (as *you* help march them to their deaths)? The narrator from "Auschwitz, Our Home . . ." spends a long section of his fifth letter to his beloved discussing hope. Notice the paradoxes of his formulation:

> *Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible, that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp even for a day?* It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity. It is hope that breaks down family ties, makes mothers renounce their children, or wives sell their bodies for bread, or husbands kill. *It is hope that compels man to hold on to one more day of life, because that day may be the day of liberation.* (121)[6]

The comment begins as an encomium to hope (italicized), moves into a damning critique of how hope promotes renunciation and immorality (underlined), and then returns to a positive appraisal (maybe) by citing hope's ability to promote survival (italicized again). We have positive and negative assessments side-by-side-by-side. However, they are not in

competition with each other; both are part of the realities of survival. Hope is like beauty. It keeps some alive while killing off others. It allows you to stand the concentration camp and thus to survive it, in the hope of a better tomorrow. But it also can help to justify your laughter about lighting children's hair on fire, or your appreciation for the nuances of wine taken from the packs of executed men.

Beauty stands simultaneously at a remove from the camps' injustice and as part of this injustice. This is why the discourse of complicity is as much about what is happening within the stories as about the stories themselves—because the stories simultaneously resist and reconstruct the horrors of camp life. We know Borowski survived in part because of the very existence of these stories. Though there is more to it than that, for these are not just testaments of what happened; they are testaments manipulated toward the goal of creating literary beauty. In the immortal words of the Penguin English-language edition's back cover, they are both "cruel testimony to the level of inhumanity of which man is capable" and "a masterpiece of world literature." As much as these stories ask us to confront with a critical gaze the way the labor camps' survivors enjoyed boxing matches and concerts while thousands were sent to the gas, these same stories force us to confront our own appreciation of these stories that have been built out of the delicate components of human misery. Should we find these stories beautiful considering what they recount? To say that their tragic elements are not beautiful because things like this really happened is nonsense. All tragedy is experienced as tragic if and only if it is experienced as truthful, whether we are talking about some mythical king who slept with his mother or some film about a big ship sinking in the Atlantic.

In the *Confessions* Augustine rails against those who would weep for the plight of Hecuba while ignoring the baseness of their own souls. Which prompts us to wonder if we enjoyers of Borowski's writing would be considered more or less guilty by an Augustine for weeping at these characters' plight. Shouldn't we weep, though? They were real people after all. Or were they? The narrator of "Auschwitz, Our Home" is not so anonymous in Polish as in translation. The beloved's bunkmates respond to his gloomy letters, "'Mówiłaś, że ten Tadeusz jest pogodny'" (*Pożegnanie z Marią* 117). The "'You told us he was so cheerful'" of the English is, in the original, closer to "'You said this Tadeusz was cheerful.'"

One last time now: "There can be no beauty if it is paid for by human injustice." The redheaded Elder's reaction to singing, Mirka's exasperation with the narrator—the reactions of these women are reactions against the experience of beauty as divorced from this place. At the same time, the very need to react this way is testament to the way beauty resists such monstrous contexts. If Borowski's narrators are complicit in the horrors of all this injustice, it is because they have become part of the regularity of these horrors. Routine turns an atrocity into a minor event, generalizing it to the point of banality. What can there be to hope for when that which is by definition extraordinary—atrocities being extraordinary in the level of horror they achieve—is rendered everyday? The unique nature of the extraordinary is lost; uniqueness is both positive and negative because of the way it is uncommon. Thus the routine we speak of is a kind of human injustice so banal as to be common, which is to say, so unimaginative as to make imagining any different kind of world foolish. Where does beauty stand in such a place?

Beauty, though, can also be made routine. As with evil, it is rendered more human in the process.

In Absentia

We have contradicted ourselves. If turning evil into routine humanizes it, then claiming that beauty is never something experienced as routine means that it is somehow less susceptible to banality than evil. But anyone who has ever been to the Louvre knows that beauty too can be made routine (or at least, experienced as such). So then why does the beauty we find in Borowski's stories resist routine so profoundly? Why do moments of beauty seem to contradict the overall routine of the camps; if this routine is capable of rendering banal such horrors, why can it not do the same to forms of beauty? We could answer these questions by deferring to numbers: notice the quantity of horrors on display, versus the dearth of beauty. But there is no reason to believe that the episodes singled out are the only vestiges of beauty left in the camps; they just so happen to be the only ones our narrator has chosen to highlight. Numbers will always be a deceptive way of rendering the experience of beauty and injustice (for reasons the field of statistics perhaps dramatizes most concisely).

In theory, beauty should be less resistant to the effects of routine than evil, because both routine and beauty are forward-looking. Routine by definition is a sequence of repeated events. Routine looks forward because repetition

assumes tomorrow will always come. In Borowski's stories, though, the camps have distorted this aspect of routine's identity by establishing a routine of annihilation. Because of this, the forward-looking element of the beauty found in these camps comes across as grotesquely inappropriate and as such, unjust. When evil is rendered banal, it is not the essence of evil that is rewritten as much as the essence of banality.

The routine of the prison camps is an extreme variety of the negative potential inherent to routine. Any sequence is qualified by the events within its patterning. At the same time, in speaking about routine we are not speaking about the sequence as the sum total of its component events but as the temporal procedure of placing these events within a line. To say that routine humanizes is not to say that a sequence of events considered from hindsight, after the sequence has ended, renders each of these events more human. It is to say that the potential for individual events to be rendered banal derives from experiencing these events as repeatable, banal because repeatable implies facility. Not that sequencing human atrocity into an ordered, repeated experience is an easy feat to accomplish. Likewise, it is no small feat to arrange some of the greatest works of art in an old Parisian palace in such a way as to render the experience of these works tiring. However, routine establishes a certain level of trust in things to come, which can lead to passivity, even blindness.[7] This is why repeating events oftentimes renders them anonymous.

Thus, routine diminishes individuality because of that which makes it forward-looking. In diminishing individuality and in thereby implying facility, routine makes of events into aspects of being-in-the-world. This is why evil turned routine is so damning. If it is of this world, it is about us. But this is also why beauty turned routine should be considered so restorative. If beauty is of this world, it too should be about us.

But this last statement's assault against common sense is too much. Beauty rendered routine is usually considered a negative. The most powerful reactions to beauty are almost always described as reactions to the extraordinary, or as moments of feeling that are extraordinary. This is how the *ekstasis* that Longinus describes in his treatise on the sublime works. Few of us are "placed out of ourselves" by the everyday. At the very least, not if *every day* is experienced as *everyday*.[8] What happens, though, when every day is so horrific?[9] (Perhaps, then, this is why the works of art you get to at the end of your trip to the Louvre oftentimes have less of a transformative experience on us. Does this mean they are less "beautiful," though?)

"The People Who Walked On" ends with the narrator thinking back to that final summer in Auschwitz. He recalls the colorful procession of people walking along both roads; he recalls the redheaded Elder unable to stand a woman's singing. He recalls "the Jew with bad teeth, standing beneath [his] high bunk." We remember him. He is in love with Mirka. He is the man who keeps asking "insistently":

"Any packages today? Couldn't you sell me some eggs for Mirka? I'll pay in marks. She is so fond of eggs." (97)

This is how the story ends, with another small episode from camp life, which I assume would be considered pretty humdrum to most people, this daily exercise of finding something to eat, for ourselves, for others, even for a woman you are fond of. To call this routine is problematic, though, for it is no small matter this securing of eggs for Mirka. Perhaps we can say that such a thing would be considered a relatively routine thing in any other situation. Another way of putting it is that when surviving extermination has become the new routine, getting your hands on some eggs seems a bit less banal. As Guido Mollering writes, "Without routines, we would not even have the capacity to attend to non-routine issues" (52).

In "Auschwitz, Our Home . . ." the narrator finds solace in the fact that when he returns he will find a new volume of his poetry. "'They are your love poems,'" he says to his beloved:

I think it is somehow symbolic that our love is always tied to poetry and that the book of poems which were written for you and which you had with you at the time of your arrest is a kind of victory *in absentia*. (138)

The love that is always tied to poetry, which has survived as a book, in spite of the couple's separation and the poet's incarceration—a stand-in for the stories themselves, within the story itself. A material object to provide aesthetic pleasure for a reader, a simple book that *must* come from worlds away. Because a volume of love poetry must have been composed far from a place as atrocious as a concentration camp—in the Polish it is "z daleka," a victory, literally, "from afar" (*Pożegnanie z Marią* 141). Is this the absence of which he speaks?

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson reminds us that poetry, letters—these are all just forms of promise. Writer and reader are two halves of one dependent communiqué, the way Aristophanes' lovers in the *Symposium* are halves of an individual cleaved in two. The desire to create meaning between consumers of language is as dependent on absence as is the desire to love and be loved between consumers of eros. The aspiration to reach beyond yourself is created and conditioned by that space between. We conceive of the objects of our love as a positive lack; we want them close while understanding that distance is the reason for this want, because what we desire is not possession, but the possibility inherent in imagining ourselves as one half of that which suddenly seems to explain the various absences of ourselves. Eros is a striving to traverse the space that separates us, but a striving that depends on never making it to the other side. Literature functions similarly. The moment you no longer believe that there is still some gap you need to cross to get at some form of meaning in a poem or a letter is the moment you have exhausted your desire to interact with it. A text's beauty is not so dissimilar from a lover's: both exist *in potentia*; which means both are forward-looking. Which means both are dependent on absence.

Potential, like *absence*, implies *presence*, because what never was is not technically absent, and because what once was could always return (in some manner or other). The promise of happiness is a promise of novelty, since happiness excludes banality. Banality is the experience of routine as presentness, which means, the experience of the forward-looking element of routine as a promise of perpetual presentness and never as novelty. Because routine denotes a sequence of repeated events, but banality ascribes a negative value to that sequence. The difference lies in the degree of facility with which we imbue the sequence with novelty, and thus, with the potential for beauty. Absence does not necessarily promise newness, but it does not necessarily promise banality either. Absence is un-valenced. The space between is always an actor's projection.

Borowski's young narrator gloats only once. To write that his love will survive the war because a few poems seem to be on the verge of survival themselves, is a boast. Perhaps we can even say it is callous of him to admit this. As the possessions of the gassed pass through the hands of those who have aided in their deaths, as the beloveds of so many are being exterminated, he writes and she reads (maybe). Would the many killed whose love letters are now displayed like roses in golden frames in Holocaust museums across

Europe also think of their love affairs as victories? The love that survives through poetry can be considered a victory *in absentia*, not because love is a triumph over ugliness, but because all forms of love, like all forms of beauty—including poetry—can only exist *in absentia*. Which is akin to saying that the absence inherent to them is really just part of their routine. Sometimes we lose track of this, since routine is so good at turning the absence of all that is forward looking into an experience of presentness. This holds true as much with the banality of mass extermination, as with the subtle displays of affection we lose track of when we waste our time trying to buy our beloveds something to eat, like eggs.[10]

JAMES NIKOPOULOS is Assistant Professor in the department of World Languages and Literature at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan.

NOTES

1. Emphasis added.

2. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi describes the soccer match he and other Sonderkommando members played against the SS while onlookers cheered and placed bets. Giorgio Agamben's reaction to this is relevant: "This match might strike someone as a brief pause of humanity in the middle of an infinite horror. I, like the witness, instead view [. . .] this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp." Agamben sees this as part of "our shame, the shame of those who did not know the camps and yet, without knowing how, are spectators of that match" (26).

3. Borowski was of course not the only author concerned that "the writer's devotion to the beauty of language and form might somehow convert for the better the irreducible ugliness and brutality of the Holocaust ordeal" (135). See Lawrence Langer's relevant discussion of Primo Levi as writer and witness.

4. Emphasis added.

5. Many thanks to Zbigniew Wojnowski for help with the Polish. Though any deficiencies in interpretation, here or elsewhere, are the author's own.

6. In the Polish, Borowski eschews an expression that is closer to the English "could stand something" in favor of the verb "to live." Thus the "we could stand the concentration camp even for a day" of the second sentence is "żylibyśmy w obozie choć jeden dzień"—"we could live in a camp just one day" (124). The difference, though important, does not alter the sentiment on which I am basing my argument.

7. Guido Möllering: "When trust is a matter of routine, it can still be reasonable, but the main point is that the routine is performed without questioning its underlying assumptions, without assessing alternatives and without giving justifications every time . . . This suggests an unsettling and provocative image of trust, as it implies a certain blindness and passivity" (52).

8. The New Oxford American dictionary reminds us that what happens each day is always written with two words, while that which pertains to the ordinary gets its own unified term.

9. In bringing together beauty and Longinus' *ekstasis*, I am going against the grain. The history of aesthetic theory usually distinguishes between beauty and *ekstasis* or the sublime (Longinus' treaty is traditionally translated as *On the Sublime*). A recent piece that discusses the distinction is Evgeny A. Dobrenko's discussion of Soviet beauty. Dobrenko defines beauty as "harmony realized" and the sublime as the "potential possibility of harmony." Considering that my definition of beauty aligns with Stendhal's, who emphasizes "promise," I don't see the two as so distinct.

10. In 1946, Anatole Girs published a Polish book in Munich with the title *We Were in Auschwitz*. It included Borowski's principle stories and this insightful comment from its publisher: "Is this book necessary? I don't know. Whatever will be said about it, however, one thing is irrefutably clear: the art in it must be separated from the documentation."

Langer connects these words to Primo Levi's lifelong insistence that he was not a writer but a witness. Though Levi had not read this text, both he and Borowski "recognized from the start the hybrid nature of Holocaust literature, in which the imagination would be forced to serve the facts, and not vice versa." Above two citations in Langer (145).

Allow me to make clear that in arguing that art and documentation are not irrefutably separate in Borowski's stories, I am not attempting to grant meaning to the suffering on display therein. I refer you to C. Fred Alford's important point that all suffering should not be made meaningful, "as though doing so were a moral duty" (7).

Alford refers to Kristeva's idea of the sublime as "the abject in the cocoon of beauty." As he puts it, "beauty is the difference between reading Sartre's Nausea and being its protagonist" (9–10). Once again, the difference is never so distinct. Suffering, after all, is observed and therefore imagined as much as it is experienced, and meaning is never so snobbish as to live in an either/or world.

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