Terrible Beauty: Aesthetics of Death in Polish and Japanese War Literature

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Abstract

War narration is inseparably linked to the image of death, which is a very sensitive issue. This paper shows how in two different cultures writers have attempted to turn death into something good, heroic and even beautiful. I am concerned with how death in wartime can arouse an aesthetic response. In discussing the representation of death in the war literature of Poland and Japan, the long-standing question of aesthetic attitudes to the traumatic experience of war in the twentieth century is raised. This paper draws on texts related to the Second World War in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: death, war literature, comparative literature, aestheticization

Introduction

There is a Latin maxim—*inter arma silent Musae* ("amidst [the sound of] arms the Muses fall silent"). For contemporary application it would quite possibly have to be complemented by a question mark. The large corpus of literary works to which great world wars have given birth confirms that the question mark is not improper. The twentieth century was the bloodiest in human history and, at the same time, one of the most fertile periods in literature. The world faced the most destructive conflicts in history, such as World War I and World War II, which caused the deaths of millions of men, women and children. Death had never been closer—war became more than a distant and romantic episode; on the contrary, it became daily life. Personal grief and the loss of an individual became lost in a mass bereavement. Certain authors, in Japan, Poland and elsewhere, initiated a response to this overwhelming cruelty and depersonalized death, turning their thoughts and experiences into a variety of literary forms: poetry, drama, memoirs and especially prose (both fiction and non-fiction) based on the events of twentieth-century conflicts. The theme of wartime death became the *leitmotif* of the epoch.

In their introduction to the collection of essays *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*, Jakob Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman and James Phelan claim that "the narratives that endure, and that have the greatest chance of transmitting the story to the future generations, all possess a significant aesthetic dimension" (2012, 2). Nonetheless, throughout the twentieth century, literary critics excluded war narratives from the canon of literature to which aesthetic qualities are assigned, invoking Theodor Adorno's famous notion that "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1981). What made fictional depiction of war controversial in the years following wartime experiences was the risk of dehumanization and destruction becoming normalized and justified.

The research questions of this paper are inspired by a recent acceleration of aesthetics scholarship within contemporary study of war literature. Scholars such as Mark Godfrey and Brett Kaplan call for investigation of various aesthetic strategies that render the Holocaust experience into some kind of beautiful piece of artwork.[1] This approach sets the broad area of the study, important for in-depth reflection. In summary, my deliberations will focus on

[1] See: B.A. Kaplan (2007), *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*, University of Illinois Press; and M. Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, Yale University Press.

finding beauty within death on the battlefield and in portrayals of dying after the Second World War.

The appropriate methodological approach would require stepping beyond the traditional boundaries of literary studies and expanding them to contain the comparative and the anthropological contexts. The subject of the analysis is culturally different artistic traditions. I have collated various texts to analyze how their authors created meanings in relation to war death.[2] The following study identifies aesthetically oriented elements of these works and examines how battlefield death has been changed into something beautiful. The peculiar parallels between concentration-camp-related fiction and A-bomb *hibakusha* narratives have already been discussed in scholarly writings;[3] however, a parallel between Polish and Japanese war literature has never been drawn. This paper has such a focus, in an attempt to prove that, despite different historical and cultural circumstances as well as various traditions, there are "common places" in approaching the issue of an aesthetic response to war.

Aesthetic Attitudes toward Death in War

From this starting point arises the question: *How has death in war become the subject of an aesthetic experience?* (Ossowski 1973.) The mutual relationship between death and dying, on the one hand, and aesthetics has often been very ambivalent. Death as such is considered to be a traumatic and frightful experience. In this respect, aesthetics almost always deals with the nature of art, beauty, and harmony. So how have these two apparently incompatible concepts, i.e., beauty/harmony and ugliness/chaos, come together? In his famous treaty on aesthetics, entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* the philosopher Edmund Burke states:

[2] While considering the large body of literature on war and its aftermath, I was very selective about my choice of relevant examples. For the present purpose, I have decided to rely on four novels. They are: *In a Demolished House* (W rozwalonym domu, 1946) by Jan Dobraczynski; *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (Pożegnanie z Marią, 1959) by Tadeusz Borowski; *Summer Flowers* (Natsu no hana, 1947) by Hara Tamiki and *Grave of the Fireflies* (Hotaru no haka, 1967) by Nosaka Akiyuki. I believe that such juxtaposition of post-war writings can offer some insight into the aesthetic aspects of wartime death and dying.

[3] Significant work in this field was a Ph.D. thesis entitled *Critical Comparative Approaches to Testimonial Literature Emergent from the Holocaust and the Atomic Bombings,* written by Gwyneth Bodger (2008, University of Sheffield). In contrast, this present article focuses exclusively on the aesthetic dimension of death in Polish and Japanese literature.

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (1764, 58–59)

In this way aesthetics circumscribes more than only a beauty, having also the capacity to arouse feeling. Wartime death has indeed become a subject of aesthetic consideration, and notions of the portrayal of death are readily explored in contemporary literature. Our understanding of death aesthetics needs to be preceded by a brief recognition of the cult around battlefield death, occurring, as it turns out, from the earliest beginnings of society. Around the world in different eras, death has been glorified by the context and circumstances in which it occurred (Bartov 2000, 15). This has been strongly correlated with the appearance and development of the culturally valorized concept of a "good death," which evolved as a response to minimize the fatality of death (Bloch and Parry 1982). But interestingly, while the notion has been defined variously in different cultures and societies throughout history, death occurring on the battlefield has always been particularly "glorified and given a great position of honor in society" (Moore and Williamson 2003, 6).

However, a kind of paradox can be observed. The concept of a "good death" is rather broad, but most often it is characterized by a combination of familial fondness, preparation for transition, old age and, to some extent, a painless passing. At the same time, therefore, a sudden death far from home represented a "profound threat to the most fundamental assumptions about the correct way to die" (Faust 2002, 494). But what is exceptionable in peacetime becomes acceptable within the conditions of war, and vice versa. For example, an ideal deathbed is something shockingly abnormal in a time of war. Take the following passage from *To Outwit God*, based on the experiences of Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: "[W]e laughed a lot about the whole thing, … how Mikołaj was dying in such a bizarre way, you know, lying between clean sheets, in bed" (Krall 1985, 214).

War-related deaths are denied a peaceful transition to the hereafter, and thereby the ideal of a way to die. Nevertheless, and paradoxically, violent and sudden death has been transformed into an appropriate death—an aesthetic attitude toward battlefield death has developed. This accords with views expressed by the seventh-century-B.C. Spartan poet Tyrtaeus that "it is a beautiful thing for a man to fall in the front line and die fighting for the

country" (cited in Robinson 2006, 14). It is worth noting that from the earliest times there has been a clear distinction between those who died on the battlefield and those who died of other causes. This separation serves a different set of functions, and it thus seems crucial to describe the factors that have contributed to the appearance and development of the battlefield death cult.

Scholars believe this mysterious potency of the battlefield death comes with a voluntary submission to the danger of death (Moore and Williamson 2003). As they explain, participation in war allows one to confront death immediately and, what is more important, intentionally. In popular beliefs, warriors risking their own lives were meant to show their "superhuman status" and power over death. The ancient Greeks placed great importance in the belief that a mortal man could secure immortality for himself by "entering into close contact during his life with the powers of death" (Farnell 1921).

The process of transforming death into something beautiful can be viewed as a response to traumatic events. In particular, the tendency to aestheticize, it is believed, allows us to reduce *angor animi*, or the fear of death (Kuczok 2006, 38). Also, through the frequent portrayal of death, the public becomes used to its presence. Understanding the macabre nature of war requires its familiarization. Artists learned to overcome loss and to use images of death to make a painful history become a subtle and moving experience.

Any discussion on the roots of the aesthetic attitude toward death should also take into account political and ideological factors. Aesthetics was in fact a convenient instrument for propaganda and a type of exhortation to war. A change in public attitudes toward war takes place at the level of ideology, which includes a set of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual group (Barker 2005, 78). In addition, ideology is perceived as a kind of tool for controlling other groups. Wartime governments have to convince the public that war is right. Therefore, a positive image of the battlefield death was created for political purposes. This helped society accept the reality of war.

The process of transforming something awful into something beautiful is called "aestheticization" (Featherstone 1997; Welsch 1999). In a sense, this aesthetically oriented response to the battlefield death is, without a doubt, at least in part the result of a social phenomenon like the cult of wartime death, which is buried deep in ancient times. It is understandable that this cultural heritage still influences the way representation of wartime

death resonates in literature.

Indeed, the aesthetic attitude has accompanied the creation of militaristic ideals in both cultures, developing throughout the centuries of warfare. Accordingly, perhaps one of the greatest similarities is a translation of military ideals into the aesthetic discourse on death. In Poland, war has been strongly idealized in Romanticism, constituting an opposition to the harsh realities of Polish political life. The nineteenth century was a period of political turmoil: From 1795 to 1918, Poland did not exist as an independent state, and its territory was divided among the three neighboring empires of Russia, Prussia and Austria. This turned out to be a decisive factor in shaping Polish soldiers' patriotism, and, consequently, heroic glorification of battlefield death. After 1939 many writers alluded to the traditional ideals of soldiers who stand firm in their faith in God and serve their fatherland with honor till the end of their lives. The military ethos "God, Honor, Fatherland"—the motto of the Polish Army—can be seen as a main structuring element of death in their texts.

Throughout Japan's history, aesthetics has always been strongly embodied in the Samurai phenomenon and sudden violent death on the battlefield. *Bushidō*, the way of the warrior, was the martial and spiritual code the Samurai lived by. According to David A. Dilworth, it involved "absolute loyalty to one's lord, a strong sense of personal honor, devotion to duty, and the courage, if required, to sacrifice one's life in battle or in ritual" (2006, 109). This suggests that immense importance was attached to the circumstances of death. In *Hagakure*—also known as *The Book of the Samurai*—the philosophical treaty that was compiled by Yamamoto Tsunetomo in the early eighteenth century, we can read: "The way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to death, there is only the quick choice of death" (2002, 17). Indeed, the ideal samurai warrior was supposed to be fearless in the face of death. Nowadays, as noted by Nitobe Inazō, *bushidō* has greatly influenced the culture and people of Japan (2013). It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that its principles were adapted also in contemporary Japanese war fiction.

There are many other factors which influence the portrayal of war death in literature, such as writers' own experiences, political life, national history and cultural traditions. But in general, it might be said that in Poland and Japan, literary masters for centuries created a relatively beautiful image regarding deaths of brave warriors occurring as a result of armed conflicts. They looked for ways to present war death as a subtle, unrealistic, and even

beautiful spectacle. This is examined by the French writer and philosopher Guy Debord, who coined the concept of the "society of spectacle." His main idea entails that "in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (Debord 2006, 33). It seems interesting to look at wartime death from an aesthetic perspective and to determine what makes it a stylized form.

What Makes Them Heroes?

As has been noted, death in war is not considered a destructive force, but rather the fulfillment of a warrior's life. In this aspect, the representation of wartime death in the majority of literary works is undeniably interwoven with the life enjoyed by the dead. This artistic creation emerges from a simplified schema across the usual duality of "us and them," "good and evil." In keeping with this view, the representation of dying is a category that distinguishes "our" brave soldiers who found themselves in severe conditions from enemies who are ruthless and threaten world peace. Owing to the existing connection between what is aesthetic and what is good, the glorious death of the hero on the battlefield can be perceived as beautiful.

Common representations of heroes in literature describe their personalities with adjectives that have a positive connotation for the reader. Characteristic features reserved for warriors are noteworthy for their representations of physical strength and vigor; the warrior is usually shown to be a courageous hero who is brave, fearless and tenacious. *In a Demolished House* by Jan Dobraczyński offers an at-once pathetic and heroic portrayal of the Polish scouts involved in defending the Old Town Quarter during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. The novel delivers memorable scenes of death; they include those of liaison Hanna, Lieutenant Mucha, and a young scout named Franek. Those closest to the deceased speak in praise of the dead, simply by listing the most admirable qualities—usually in a superlative form: "the best," "the most beloved" (Dobraczyński 1983, 235). Throughout the book we observe the idealization of the fallen. For example, Lieutenant Mucha is considered to be "surly" and "eternally dissatisfied" (107). But when pronounced dead, he is presented in a more favourable light—"[i]t seems that this brave Lieutenant died" (100)—as his subordinates realize that they have lost someone very important to them.

Catholicism plays a prominent role in the lives of many Poles. Religion is found to influence perceptions of beauty, for "all things are beautiful as they are grounded in God." Therefore, the model of an ideal wartime death seems to be defined through fighting for the faith. In *In a Demolished House*, we read: "They [Resistance fighters] who perished while fighting for a great cause do not die. All the great causes have their beginning in the heaven above. We are not divided from heaven by an unsurpassable wall. The heaven also takes part in our fight" (Dobraczynski, 1983, 120–121). Therefore, we can conclude that it is God who inspires heroic deeds in wartime.[4] Polish warriors are portrayed as ready to die for independence and for the rebirth of their country, even if they operate outside the law. This lofty goal entirely legitimizes the killing of enemies, because in their enemies they do not see living people: "It [a German soldier] was a walking abomination" (ibid., 205).

Nevertheless, even though the soldiers are permitted to kill their enemies, they are not allowed to finish off allies who are mortally wounded. Under the influence of the Christian faith, a battlefield death is considered as part of God's ultimate plan; as such, in Dobraczyński's novel the endurance of physical pain and suffering is presented as a good thing, something that brings salvation and honor. Warsaw Uprising insurgents were resigned to death—explaining to themselves that it was the will of God (ibid., 59). Such a belief has its foundation in the tradition of Polish Messianism—the claim that Poland is a "chosen nation." In the Second World War this mode of patriotism continued and was strongly connected with Catholic writers and their faith.[5] The fact that Poland was on the winning side of the war made possible the success of this principle that Polish soldiers fought with divine providence.[6] However, the totality of the Second World War and the mass exterminations committed during the conflict, such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led to concerns about an idealized and oversimplified view of these atrocities.

[4] Moreover, a battlefield death ensures that a warrior's soul will be taken to Paradise. As the Polish poet Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński wrote in his famous poem, "A song of the soldiers of Westerplatte": "When their days had been filled / and it was time to die in the summer, / They went straight to heaven in a coach-and-four, / the soldiers of Westerplatte. / They sang: Ah, 'tis nothing / that our wounds were so painful, / for now it is sweet to walk / the heavenly fields."

[5] The idea of suffering for the Polish nation was verbalized by many Polish writers. More examples can be found in Stanisław Cieślak's article "Religiosity in Polish Literature," published in *Values in the Polish Cultural Tradition* (2002, ed. Leon Dyczewski, Washington, DC: Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change, 85–119).

[6] Notably, it was only a qualified victory. Although liberated from the Nazis, Poland became a Communist satellite of the U.S.S.R.

Writers dealing with the mass deaths of ordinary citizens questioned the traditional realm of "glory and sacrifice" because the majority of the dead in the conflict were noncombatants—those nameless civilians who postmortem were unknown to anyone and who were deprived of their characteristic features.

Between 1945 and 1948, Tadeusz Borowski, a concentration-camp survivor, wrote a number of stories about his experiences in Auschwitz. He turned to a broader overview of the "machinery of death" within the concentration camp and, unlike in the previous narratives discussed above, did not emphasize the heroic deeds of a protagonist facing the enemy. Instead, he wrote about a hideous existence in extremely dehumanizing conditions, and he focused on moral decline. In fact, he went even further, and blurred the distinction between victims and villains. He demonstrated that the prisoners who wanted to save their lives could be just as inhumane and anti-Semitic as their oppressors. In his story *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* the main protagonist, Tadek, a non-Jewish prisoner forced to work in the camp, tells another prisoner, "You see, my friend, you see, I don't know why, but I am furious, simply furious with these people [the Jews]—furious because I must be here because of them. I feel no pity. I am not sorry they're going to the gas chamber. Damn them all! I could throw myself at them, beat them with my fists" (40).

As Daniel Schwarz argues, Borowski's narrative reduces life to "a survival of the fittest where conventional morality gives way to the rule of the jungle" (1999, 133). From this perspective, heroes are those who have looked death in the eye. For example, in the aforementioned story Borowski recalls a beautiful blonde girl who decided that she did not want to be sent to the work camp and instead chooses to die in the gas chamber. Avoidance of a shameful life at a concentration camp is ultimately the reason for her decision to sacrifice her life. What makes her different, and thus heroic for Borowski, is her awareness of the hopelessness of her situation and her refusal to go on living within it. There is a mixture of beauty and breathless horror in her death:

> 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: the shaved head, the heavy Soviet trousers in sweltering heat, the sickening, stale odour of dirty, damp female bodies, the animal hunger, the inhuman labour, and later the same gas chamber, only an even more hideous, more terrible death…. (1976, 44)

Through his heroine, Borowski presents the spirit of individualism in an impersonal universe. This connection between the concepts of fearlessness and independence gives death an idealistic appeal. Personal identity is present in the minds of many characters throughout war narratives, and death serves as an option to preserve the self in its context.[7] Almost paradoxically, death becomes an expression of freedom in times of enslavement. In this way, readers come closer to recognizing the humanity of those who have perished, and of those who tried to survive in an inhumane environment.

In the face of overwhelming inhumanity, it is important to seek to understand how the individual deals with extreme conditions and maintains dignity. In the case of Japan, throughout all of the violence and suffering, wartime death in *hibakusha* literature (written by atomic-bomb survivors) is associated with positive emotions generated by the experience of courage, love and friendship, rather than being associated with fear or anger. Such positive attitudes are a characteristic feature of a corpus of literary works that explore the theme of victimhood; one such work that explores these positive themes is Hara Tamiki's *Summer Flowers*. An important feature of Tamiki's book is the belief that whereas the Imperial Japan regime was responsible for many war atrocities, a sense of moral values did not collapse among the majority of the Japanese. Such a moral stance and system of strong ethics greatly helped the Japanese to overcome the harmful consequences of the atomic bombing and paved the way for them to renounce revenge.

Many Japanese authors writing of war illustrate the life of a character that is dying. Hara's portrayal is something of a case apart among the narratives under consideration, since all of her representations signal how Japanese people who survived the bombings of Hiroshima were dedicated to helping others. A good example is a story about Hara's brother saving his wife and maid; later he is described rescuing an old man from a neighboring house. This image of mutual assistance, which Hara replicates in other chapters, counterpoints the horrors of the atomic bombing. Moreover, this representation conveys an optimistic feeling of hope for rebirth after the tragedy—the point being that life must continue even under the shadow of a horrific amount of death.

Harmony with nature—an important aesthetic concept of traditional Japanese culture—

[7] A similar resonance pervades *A World Apart* by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, in which the former communist Michaił Kostylew commits suicide by pouring boiling water over his body. He causes his own death more directly but still expresses an objection to the reality of his situation (Stabro 1997).

became a prominent element in Hara's narratives. This mode of Shinto thinking also plays a crucial role in *bushidō*. The point here is that the Samurai is no different from the blossom: as the traditional idiom goes, "From among flowers, the cherry blossom; from among men, the samurai." The glorious wartime death is frequently identified with the cultural icon of the cherry blossom (*sakura*). In contemporary Japanese literature, such a portrayal applies not only to soldiers, but also to civilians. As Hara narrates:

> A few yards away from us, two schoolgirls lay groaning for water under a cherry tree, faces burned black.... [A] woman whose face was smoked dry joined them.... [S]he stretched out her legs listlessly, oblivious to the dying girls. (1985, 49)

In 1967 Nosaka Akiyuki published *Grave of the Fireflies,* a work that displays the tenets of *bushidō* through its portrayal of the children's father, a naval Captain. He serves as a symbol of Japanese masculinity—in Seita's photography he is presented as a man dressed in uniform revealing his male potency and status as a soldier (Nosaka 1978, 447). According to his children, he is an honorable person who will take revenge for their sorrow and suffering. Unfortunately, after Japan surrenders to the Allied Powers, Seita's father is presumed to be dead: "no news from his father a naval first lieutenant aboard a cruiser" (ibid., 447). This information is not stated explicitly in the passage, of course, but it is expressed through the symbol of Japan's drowned navy and Seita's words "papa's dead too, papa's dead too" (ibid., 460). This event indicates Seita and Setsuko's father's absolute loyalty to the emperor and the country. As we have seen, courage and honor lie at the very heart of Japanese culture. But this nationalistic effort and feeling of loyalty becomes nothing more than a parody when, at the end of World War II, Emperor Hirohito renounces his divinity and the archetypal tale of sacrifice and nationalism is revealed to be based on a false notion of divine intervention. After the Emperor's renunciation, a collapse of faith occurred in the Japanese sense of self-sacrifice for the emperor and for Japan itself; and this collapse of faith turned death into a futile and meaningless gesture (Orr 2001). In this context, Nosaka provides a reinterpretation of the nihilistic view of death and destiny which places particular interest not in the hero warrior, but in the young civilian victims.

This newfound attention to the plight of the civilian during wartime is particularly prominent in the literature during the period after the Second World War, which manifests in the focus on the youngest victims of the war, mostly schoolboys and schoolgirls. For example,

Nosaka's *Grave* is centered on a beautifully told story of two children from the port city of Kobe. The main characters are Seita, a fourteen-year-old boy, and his four-year-old sister Setsuko. Here again the protagonists' ages are exalted. Moreover, any attempt to act like an adult is presented negatively and leads to misery; in the story, Seita's decision to take care of his sister by himself foreshadows the beginning of their end because it symbolizes a move away from the purity and innocence of childhood into an adult world that is saturated in war. In the story, these children are unable to understand the odious nature of war and thus are unable to sustain themselves. This thematic content is undoubtedly related to the ephemeral nature of life and of worldly things in general that is so deeply embedded in Japanese culture. Yoshida Kenkō addresses this notable aesthetic feature in his 14th-century *Essays in Idleness*: "We cannot live forever in this world, why should we wait for ugliness to overtake us? The longer man lives, the more shame he endures" (1967, 8). The author convinces his readers that the death of young people allows them to retain dignity and minimize moral damage.

The death of children is widely addressed in the literature from the post-war period. Unlike in Poland, in Japan dying young is recognized as a core element of the Japanese hero. In *Summer Flowers*, as John Treat recognizes, the only individual corpse described in detail is the young Fumihiko's (1995, 148). Hara writes that "[f]luid oozed from an immense abscess on his shirtless chest. White teeth were faintly visible on the black burnt face. The fingers on the outstretched hands were stiff and turned inward. The fingernails were held like claws" (1985, 63). Despite Fumihiko's disfigurement, his was the only body in the story that could be identified. All of the other bodies described were disfigured beyond recognition; here the identification of Fumihiko's body symbolizes the special nature of his loss. The reader must confront his corpse and acknowledge without any doubt the death of a child.

In Poland, society associates death with old age, therefore any descriptions of the death of children in warfare are confronted with trepidation and unease. In such a culture where youthful death is considered abnormal, writers add the elements of adulthood to the young warriors, thereby making their death more acceptable. In the novel *In a Demolished House,* it is explained in a passage that "[d]eath makes a person an adult" (Dobraczynski 1946, 117). In the novel, children are referred to as warriors and soldiers and described with language that connotes maturity and adult agency. Once the barriers are broken down, a positive image appears.

Between Mass and Individual

Having discussed the portrayal of the characters facing death and decay, I shall now broaden my analysis by considering how the act of dying in wartime is represented in the war literature. It is now widely acknowledged that the most notable and shared problem with representing death is an incapacity to "present the unpresentable," as it has been defined by Jean-François Lyotard (1984). Therefore, the representation of death always requires some kind of a simplification. When war death is inscribed in a narrative framework, it can be described from two perspectives: One focuses on the individual, the other on the group. Depending on the type of dying, different methods and techniques are used.

Characteristically, the representation of the protagonist's dying moments is highly detailed. The author uses slow-motion effects (a term borrowed from films) which extend the celebration of the whole process by turning it into a fascinating ritual full of theatrical gestures. The deliberate accretion of details regarding wartime death is an attempt to construct a meaningful framework of the event. An important death scene in *In a Demolished House* involves a young scout named Krzyś who was wounded during a fight. It includes all the details about his death and the circumstances surrounding it. The author presents the pain and suffering the boy goes through in an intense and detailed way.

Later in the scene, he weakens slowly, and the author writes, "He had been overtaken now by more and more befuddled weakness. His body hung heavily from the hands of another" (ibid., 223). Time seems to pass more slowly than normal. When his last moments occur, he has the benefit of expressing sorrow for his sins and receiving the last sacrament from Father Marek. This act of confession not only brings spiritual solace, but also emphasizes the awareness of death.

In a scene from Nosaka's *Grave of the Fireflies*, we find similar thematic content where the death scene is prolonged to emphasize a final confrontation with mortality. Yet here, Nosaka went even further, as he made the entire novel a prolongation of Seita and Setsuko's dying. The story begins with the premise that the main characters must die, and then it follows the path to their inevitable demise, as is illustrated in the text's opening lines: "Seita died"; "[t]he white bones were those of Seita's younger sister Setsuko, who died on August 22 in a cave, their air-raid shelter" (Nosaka 1978, 446–447). This description creates a pervasive tone

of powerlessness from the very beginning of the text, but it also presents the fearless acceptance of one's own death in such extraordinary circumstances as war.

The emphasis on passivity and victimhood is further shown in the symbolism of the fireflies that are mentioned throughout the story. The use of fireflies is one of the few events that signifies joy, but, as the critic W. Goldberg pointed out, "they also symbolize the fires that burned Japan and the lives that were lost during the war" (2009, 42).

> The night after Setsuko dies, an enormous group of fireflies appears around Seita: if it's like this maybe Setsuko won't be so lonely, fireflies will be at her side, flying up, flying down, now flying to the side, won't be long the fireflies'll be gone, but you go up to heaven with those fireflies. (Nosaka 1978, 461)

Here again, a strong positive image provides a spiritual solace. Significantly, when Setsuko finally dies, the event is mirrored by a change in the weather: "The typhoon had passed by the following day, the sky, suddenly colored deeply with shades of autumn, was filled with cloudless sunshine" (ibid., 461). This beautiful representation encourages optimism and positive thoughts in readers, recalling associations of a belief in an afterlife.

The second element common to individual death scenes is the significant role of the burial scene. When liaison Hanna dies in *In a Demolished House*, her body is brought back home. Dobraczyński provides a rich description of funeral rites, including the cleansing and dressing of the deceased's body. Afterwards, the closest friends enter into a time of "bereavement," when prayers are recited. This ritual gives time to say goodbye and to adjust to the new situation.

In a similar manner, much attention is paid to the details that follow the death of Setsuko in Nosaka's *Grave*. Firstly, Seita is sent to the crematorium and decides to prepare all cremation rites by himself. Nosaka writes, "[Seita] dug a hole on a hill overlooking Manchitani, placing Setsuko in the wicker basket, stuffing the doll, the purse, her underwear, everything, around her" (1978, 461). This is a very personal and private time for Seita. Much of the aesthetics in this scene comes from Nosaka's masterful employment of the sentimental image from "before" the bombing. Setsuko's funeral might be described as beautiful in comparison to Seita's, who "was cremated along with the corpses of 20 or 30 other homeless children" (ibid., 461), or their mother, whose dead body was sprawled alongside the furniture: "in the field below Ichio there was a hole, diameter 10 yards, where the ridge poles, pillars, doors, sliding screens of evacuated buildings were randomly piled up, the corpses on top"

(ibid., 452).

It is important to notice that among these novels, individual death is contrasted with mass dying. Repeatedly, in contrast to individual death, the image of collective murder lacks clear contours, close-ups, and characteristic details (Stabro 2002, 308). The patterns for describing mass death are those of an appalling spectacle in which the individual is pushed into the background and lost among a pile of bodies, disfigured and indistinguishable from the rest.

This type of description of mass death presents the reader with an example of the *grotesque*. Borowski undertakes the theme of communal death in the gas chamber, which he describes as "disgusting and ugly." The first-person narrator situates the omnipresent death in a descriptive tone:

> I go back inside the train; I carry out dead infants; I unload luggage. I touch corpses, but I cannot overcome the mounting, uncontrollable terror. I try to escape from the corpses, but they are everywhere: lined up on the gravel, on the cement edge of the ramp, inside the cattle cars. Babies, hideous naked women, men twisted by convulsions. (1976, 45)

The victims are usually nameless. Extreme examples of this kind of depersonalization are when people are described as "heads," and when the camp inmates are compared to animals or insects. Borowski begins his story *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* by equating delousing with the extermination procedure in the gas chambers: "Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers" (ibid., 29). Later in the same story, the narrator says: "Now they push towards the opened door, breathing like fish cast out on the sand," and describes dead infants being carried out from the train carriages as "chickens, holding several in each hand" (ibid., 39). Tony McKibbin comments on the existence of certain aesthetic conventions in Borowski's prose that convey the reality of war:

> [W]hat he wanted to do was make his language pragmatically survivalist and also, more strangely, horrible poetic, as if determined to produce metaphors and similes out of the camps that were new, capable of reflecting the casual terror of the experience, and one's sense of implication in the relation to the events. This combination of paratactic simplicity, linguistic neologisms and distinctive metaphors and similes, makes Borowski's work not 'merely' testament but literature. (McKibbin, 2)

The presented examples echo Wolfgang Kayser's understanding of the grotesque as a presentation of a world turned upside down, with "human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (1957, 183). The human form is unnaturally distorted—such planned manipulation erases a clear distinction between reality and fiction and provides the reader with a strong aesthetic experience. This approach toward

the subject of wartime death has been developed in postwar society: The grotesque became an important component of the Polish literary world.

The Japanese writers also employ the grotesque. For example, decomposing and oddly deformed bodies occupy a predominant place. For Hara Tamiki the unnatural means "indistinguishable with respect to gender" (Norris 2000, 202). His characters often do not possess feminine or masculine features. In my opinion, however, grotesquerie is not the dominant approach. Japan's culture is much more aesthetically oriented than the Polish one. This can be observed in Japanese works' representations of mass death, which are not always explicit. Authors use symbolism in their accounts of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, establishing what may be called "non-existent death." This technique relies on the power of suggestion. Indeed, this is especially true for Hara Tamiki, who describes the bomb blast and the subsequent property destruction and fallen trees.

In the view of John Treat, "it is typical of *Summer Flowers* that characters come and go with no explanation" (1995, 142). Hara has mastered his technique at the story's end, when the reader is captivated with the dramatic understatement. In the final scene, the reader's attention is directed toward a man called simply "N." who is searching for his wife: "After three days and three nights of looking at the dead and injured and being sickened by them, N. went back again to the girls' school where his wife was employed" (1985, 60). With his mission unfulfilled, we are left with a sense of emptiness and compassion. The reader shares the feelings with those who could not find their relatives.

The category of *mono no aware* (understood as "the pathos of things") is significant here as a response to the mass death. This convention has no correspondence in Polish literary works. Hara draws attention to the terrible beauty of the scenery after the atomic bombing, and then emphasizes this image through a comparison to surreal art:

> Amid the vast silvery expanse of nothingness that lay under the glaring sun, there were the roads, the river, the bridges, and the stark naked, swollen bodies. The limbs of the corpses, which seemed to have become rigid after struggling in their last agony, had a kind of haunting rhythm. In the scattered electric wires and countless wrecks there was embodied a spasmodic design in nothingness. The burnt and toppled streetcar and the horse with its huge belly on the ground gave one an impression of a world described by a Dali surrealist painting. (Ibid., 51)

This parallel gives death an emotional appeal. Amidst the presented destruction and tragic loss of life, mass death can be perceived as beautiful (Treat 1995, 139). The techniques used

by these writers allow the readers to maintain a proper distance from the presented events, so that the death becomes unreal. The less the bodies resemble human figures, the easier one can get used to their death. Also, the use of landscape aesthetics simplifies the setting in order to achieve the effect of unreality in the literary world.

The Question of Aesthetics

To summarize, my analysis has aimed to prove that aesthetics has become a reaction in post-war writing. Whatever moral or intellectual doubts may appear, aestheticization in war literature seems to be unavoidable. A consideration of the set of aesthetics in both Poland and Japan is essential in analyzing the image of death in their war literatures. This article has presented to what extent command values and moral principles have inspired the aesthetic approach toward battlefield death, and how they have been implemented by twentieth-century writers. It suggests that the aesthetic experience may be achieved by integrating military prowess and martial ideals offered by ancient warriors into the literature.

In the post-war atmosphere of misery, there appears to be a need for a restoration of values. The years of World War II brought, once again, a renaissance in the traditional appreciation that was associated with the representation of heroes. If we look into the presented stories we will see roots in the ancient cults of warriors conducive to the development of a positive image of battlefield death in literary output. In this context, ideology plays a very important role in communicating certain attitudes and values which are desirable in a given society. For the civilians, the aesthetic representation of battlefield death in literature acts to protect their psyches from the impending danger of the conflict.

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