



The Poetry and Prose of Tadeusz Borowski

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Tadeusz Borowski was, at heart, a poet. He only turned to writing prose late in his hauntingly short, yet powerful, career. His poetry and prose were completely inspired by his life, although they are quite dissimilar and driven by very different experiences and needs. His early poetic writings were his response to the madness that was the norm in Nazi occupied Poland. At the age of 20 he self-published, on a mimeograph machine, his first collection of poetry, *Gdziekolwiek Ziemia* (*Wherever the Earth*). According to Jan Kott, Polish critic and scholar, this work:

"...predicted in classical cadences the extermination of mankind. Its dominant image was that of a gigantic labor camp. Already, in that first volume of poetry, there was no hope, no comfort, no pity. The last poem, "A Song," concluded with a prophecy delivered like a sentence: "We'll leave behind us iron rap / and the hollow, mocking laugh of generations."

Of Borowski's prose, author Hamida Bosmajian maintains: "Borowski's stories, while they can be arranged to give the illusion of beginning, middle and end, are really memory shards in which he retraces his guilt, reacts aggressively against it, and mocks himself profoundly as an artist in a world of stone." While his prose was fiction, it was based upon the stark and horrible truth of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Borowski was born in 1922 in Zytoierz, Ukraine. His family was Polish, but lived in the Soviet Union at the time of his birth (Meyer 617). His parents, Polish resistance fighters, were deported as dissidents. His father was deported when Borowski was four years old; his mother was deported when he was eight. They were reunited with him in Warsaw in 1932. He later complained of his lack of family life: "either my father was sitting in Murmansk or my mother was in Siberia, or I was in a boarding school, on my own or in camp [sic]" (Marszalek). Borowski received his early education from Franciscan monks in Warsaw. As the Nazis forbade the Polish an education beyond elementary school, he attended underground classes at Warsaw University.

It should be remembered that Borowski's entire body of work was completed by the time he was 29 years old. He was a very young man to have lived through all that he did. His poetic works are full of emotion, questions and longing, yet lacking in hope and faith. The poem "Curriculum Vitae" is his personal lament that he was not a fighter in the Polish resistance. He feels guilt that he spent his time in youthful pursuits. He cries, "That was my life / ...poems, love, without character, empty, pale. / Perhaps it would not have been wasted / if I'd killed just one single German" (Borowski). His need to tell the story of this time is evident in the poem "The Interrogation." It begins "for Witek Piatkowski:"

They beat him all day, and the next. Nothing doing.
They beat him 'round the clock, all week.
"Talk, talk," they shouted, "we know everything!
We know your alias! And your name!"
They showed his ID, banged his head on the table.
"Say just one sentence! Just one word!"
They showed him his passport, foreign visas,
books and secret documents from the lining of his suitcase,
but then when they showed him his English toy gun
he said, "take away the tablecloth, I'm going to throw up."
That's all he said. He was black and blue.
They took him to Majdanek, locked him behind the wire.
At night he cut the wire, escaped right under the sentries' eyes.
What use is glory if this memory dies?

The driving force behind his writings, perhaps in part due to his regret at not playing an active role in the resistance, was to tell these stories – so the memories would not die.

In 1943 Borowski was arrested by the Germans and sent to the concentration camps. While incarcerated, he continued writing poetry. These poems are full of anguish but they reveal the horror of the camps in poetic language. In "October Sky" he writes: "October was beautiful. /...I saw the lines of smoke the wind traced on the elusive sky / and I waited for the moment / when

this unreachable sky would lean toward them / to absorb them." He goes on to say: A red flame moved across the sky and glistened on the grass in a russet stream. / Above this sky, a sky covered with smoke, / another sky hung clear and empty / and the smoke of the first sky drowned in the second." He is writing of the smoke and embers from the crematoriums where the Jews were being cremated. The poetic language cloaks the horror of this reality. It makes it elusive, so that when the words sink into the consciousness of the reader, the reality is much more



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horrible than if he had used a stark, literal description.

As the war drew to a close, Borowski's poetic work became more tormented. It is to be remembered that he

was still a very young man. When the Allies liberated his camp in 1945, he was only 23 years old. He was moved from the Nazi run concentration camp to an Allied run displaced person's camp. As with most writers of poetry, Tadeusz Borowski was an emotionally sensitive being, one who felt things deeply and questioned the disparities in life. As such, surviving the war was not really a victory for him. One of the last poems he wrote from the displaced person's camp was "Lines in an Autograph Album." He writes: "maybe I should just let myself / tumble downhill like a stone / and like a statue see the world / through cold lifeless eyes."

His prose, first published after the war in the collections *We Were in Auschwitz* and *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, may seem to be written by a writer with 'cold lifeless eyes.' Borowski's prose is a seemingly emotionally detached accounting of his fictional creations' experiences. Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* and his contribution to the book *We Were in Auschwitz* were dramatic departures from his earlier poetic works. "...A voyage to the limit of a particular experience" is how Borowski described his book about Auschwitz (Kott). *This Way for the Gas* was published in Poland before Borowski returned to the country. People there, including church and government officials, were outraged. No one wanted an account of Auschwitz, or any other camp, unless it portrayed all survivors as heroes. They wanted stories of good and evil, with clearly depicted heroes and villains. Borowski's stories did not give them what they wanted. He wrote of the human instinct for survival. He wrote the truth of man's inhumanity to man. Tadeusz Borowski offered this explanation: "True, I could also lie employing the age-old methods which literature has accustomed itself to using in pretending to express the truth – but I lack the imagination" (qtd. in Wirth). In his review of Borowski's work, Andrzej Wirth states:

The uniqueness of his position lies in that his writing does in fact give witness to this truth. Artistic as well as ordinary human courage was needed to achieve this; and artistic resourcefulness as well. Borowski possessed all these qualities. He was able to depict tragedy outside the classical laws of tragedy. He created tragedy according to a new

law: a tragedy without alternative, without choice, without competing values. He demonstrated prototypes of situations which are tragic in themselves. Situations created by a system which had treated man as an object, as a thing, and taken away from him the possibility of being human. Borowski had the courage to say this. He also had the courage to formulate a principle that once a certain limit of inhumanity is passed, the differentiation between tormentor and victim becomes fluid.

One of the most telling scenes in *This Way for the Gas* is that of a young, beautiful Jewish woman who confronts the narrator with the question: "Listen, tell me where are they taking us?" She is demanding to be told where they are taking the Jewish prisoners. When he does not answer, she says: "I know," with a shade of proud contempt in her voice, tossing her head (Meyer 626). This woman is the hero of this story. She turns and runs up the steps of the transport, pushing aside someone who tries to stop her. She could have saved herself. She was young, beautiful and healthy. These things would have saved her. She chose certain death instead. She chose to die with integrity and pride and felt contempt for those who chose life at any cost. *This Way for the Gas* is fiction based upon truth. It offers no easy explanation for the choices made by the narrator, or by the others in the story. But even though this, and other stories, by Borowski seems to be without hope, Borowski blames hope for all the devastating choices made by the characters. He offered this explanation:

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. Ah, and not even the hope for a different, better world, but simply for life, a life of peace and rest. Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers (qtd. In Mercedes).

After the publication of *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Borowski became a writer for the Communist government. Many people harshly judged his choice. He publicly defended this decision, but privately told his friends that he had "stepped on the throat of his own song" (Kott).

He did not long survive the post war world. Though one may on speculate the reasons, Tadeusz Borowski committed suicide at the age of 29 years. The irony of his suicide is that he chose to take his life by gassing himself in his kitchen oven. One of his untitled poems, written after the war seems prescient:

neither poems nor prose
just a length of rope
just the wet earth –
that's the way home.
...neither sleep nor waking
neither joy nor laughter
just tears in the night –
so the rope, paper, knife.

Tadeusz Borowski lived a relatively short life in a world gone mad. His writing was totally driven by his life experience. In his introduction to *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* Jan Knott states:

There are years and places, sometimes whole decades and entire nations, in which history reveals its menace and destructive force with particular clarity. These are chosen nations, in the same sense in which the Bible calls the Jews a chosen people. In such places and years history is – as my teacher used to say - "let off the leash." It is then that individual human destiny seems as if shaped directly by history, becoming only a chapter in it.

Borowski and his works cannot be separated from his times. They are inextricably woven together, one would not exist without the other. Had Borowski been born in another time, or even in another place, he would not have written as he did.

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