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. The presentation shows how in two different cultures writers have succeeded in turning death into something good, heroic and even beautiful. I am interested in how the representation of death and dying can arouse aesthetic pleasure and fascination. In discussing the image of death in war literature, the long-standing question of aesthetic response to the traumatic experience of war in the twentieth century is raised. This article draws on texts related to the Second World War.

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 century in human history and, at the same time, one of the most fertile times 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; yet the number of deaths has never been estimated. War became more than a distant and romantic episode; it became the daily life. Death had never been closer and the loss of an individual became lost in a mass bereavement. Literature initiated a response to this overwhelming cruelty and depersonalized death. Certain authors, both in Japan and in Poland sought to explore this historical trauma and ideological rift. They expressed their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a variety of literary forms: in poetry, drama and especially in fiction based on the events of twentieth-century conflicts. The theme of wartime death became the *leitmotif* of the epoch.

The subject of the analysis are culturally different artistic traditions. I collate various texts to present how their authors created meanings in relation to war death. The following study identifies aesthetically-oriented elements of these works and examines how battlefield death has been changed into something beautiful. A parallel between Polish and Japanese war literature has never been made, thus such a choice was determined by the intention 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 Attitude towards War Death

From this arises the question: *How has war death become the subject of an aesthetic experience?* (Ossowski, 1973). The mutual relation 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 stands on the contrary, dealing with the nature of art*,* beauty, and harmony. So, how have these two apparently incompatible concepts, i.e. beauty and ugliness, tranquility and chaos, come together in perfect harmony? In his famous treaty on aesthetics, titled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* philosopher Edmund Burke (1860) states*:*

> "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" (p. 45).

In this way aesthetics encompass more than beauty but have the ability to arouse feeling. Wartime death has indeed become a subject of aesthetic consideration, and notions of the portrayal of death are 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. Across the world in different eras, death was glorified by the context in which it occurred. This was 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 variously been defined in different cultures and societies throughout history, death occurring on the battlefield was always particularly "glorified and given a great position of honor in society" (Moore and Williamson, 2003, p. 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 affection, preparation for death, old age and a relatively painless transition. A sudden death far from home, therefore, represented a profound threat to the most fundamental assumptions about the correct way to die. War-related deaths denied a peaceful transition to the hereafter and thereby the ideal of a good death. Nevertheless, we have developed an aesthetic attitude towards battlefield death. This accords with views expressed by the seventh-century 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, p. 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. Moreover, an ideal deathbed is something shockingly abnormal under conditions of war. An example is the following passage from *To Outwit God*, based on the experiences of Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: "we 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, p. 214).

It 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). Participation in war allows one to confront death immediately and, what is more important, intentionally. Although warriors do not choose to die, they always live in their awareness of death. In popular beliefs warriors risking their own lives were meant to show their "superhuman status" and power over death. The ancient Greeks placed immense in the belief that a mortal man could secure blessed immortality for himself by entering into close contact during his life with the powers of death. Moreover, war lifted the individual out of his private selfishness.

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

The discussion on the roots of the aesthetic attitude towards death should also take into account political and ideological factors. This was in fact a convenient instrument for propaganda and a type of exhortation of war. A change in public attitudes towards 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). In addition, ideology is perceived as a kind of tool for controlling other groups. The wartime government had to convince the public that war action 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 nice 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. Now, it is understandable that this cultural heritage still influences the way representation of wartime death resonates in literature.

Writers have throughout the ages looked for ways to present war death as a subtle, unrealistic, and even beautiful spectacle. This is examined by French writer and philosopher Guy Debord who coined the concept of "the society of spectacle". His main idea implies that: "in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything was directly lived has moved away into representation" (Debord, 2006, p. 33). It seems interesting to look at wartime death from a less real angle and to determine what makes it a stylized, aesthetic form.

God, Honor, Fatherland

In Poland, writers created a relatively beautiful image regarding battlefield death. War has been strongly idealized in Romanticism, constituting the opposition harsh realities of Polish political life. The nineteenth century was a period of political turmoil – Poland did not exist as an independent state and its territory was divided among three neighboring Empires – Russia, Prussia and Austria – from 1795 to 1918.

This turned out to be a decisive factor in shaping Polish soldiers patriotism. After 1939 many writers alluded to romantic ideals of soldiers, who stand firm in faith in God and serve with honor to their fatherland till the end of their lives. The military ethos "God, Honour, Fatherland" – the motto of the Polish Army – can be concerned as a main structuring element of death in their texts. In this chapter, a translation of military ideals into the aesthetic discourse on death will be discussed.

First of all, when it comes to the battlefield death, the aesthetic effect is achieved through the use of religious components. The role of Catholicism plays an important role in the lives of many Poles. Religion is found to influence perceptions of beauty, as "all things are beautiful as they are grounded in God". Therefore, the model of an ideal wartime death seemed to be defined through fighting for the faith. *In a Demolished House* by Jan Dobraczyński, a priest officiating over the funeral of Resistance fighter says: "He who perished while fighting for a great cause does 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" (1969: 112-13). The battlefield death meant a warrior's soul was being 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".

Moreover, under the influence of Christian faith a battlefield death is considered as part of God's plans; for example, suffering in Dobraczyński's novel is a good thing bringing salvation. Warsaw Uprising insurgents resigned to death – explaining to themselves that it was the will of God. Their religiosity is repeatedly emphasized. It is considered to be a sign of chosenness. Such a belief has a certain basis in the tradition of Polish *Messianism* – the claim of being a 'chosen nation'.

Poland's major literary works portrayed death as an honourable act. This is articulated in two ways: (1) through the use of positive characters, due 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, (2) the representation of death as an escape from human cruelty. As the poet of *Beowulf* states that death with honour is better than a life of shame (1966). Total war and mass extermination led to mass deaths of ordinary people. This impacted the image of the battlefield death – Polish literature gave ordinary citizens substantial focus in their texts.

The death of the heroes at the end of the book titled *Stones for the Rampart*, about the Polish underground scout movement (operating under the codename of "Grey Ranks") is aesthetically enhanced by the qualities of the characters. Wartime death is associated with positive emotions generated by the experience of courage and friendship (rather than stimulated and accompanied by fear or anger).

To portray the death of a positive character the author uses slow-motion effects (a term borrowed from filming) which extend the celebration of the whole process by turning it into a fascinating ritual full of theatrical gestures. The death is pure and innocent, while on the contrary, the death of the enemy takes place at a faster than normal speed.

The death of young soldiers, as presented in *Stones*, is used to create an icon of war, manufacturing the heroes and heroic actions that are needed in society. The book's author, Aleksander Kaminski, created three heroic myths. One is about young and brave soldiers who have found themselves in severe conditions. The second describes enemies who are ruthless and threaten world peace. The last one presents Polish soldiers who never leave their friends without helping them even if they are operating outside of the law. When, in 1943 the book was published, the work intended to reinvigorate a crippled national spirit during the tumultuous times of World War II.

The honorable aspect of wartime death also appeared in the literature of the Holocaust. Between 1945-1948, Tadeusz Borowski, a concentration camp survivor, wrote a cycle of stories about his experiences from Auschwitz. The author undertook the theme of communal death in the gas chamber, which he described as "disgusting

and ugly". The first-person narrator situates the omnipresent death in a descriptive and matter-of-fact tone (1976):

> "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" (p. 12).

The image of collective murder lacks clear contours, close-ups, characteristic details (Stabro, 2002). The victims are usually nameless. An extreme example of this is a kind of figure of depersonalization, when people are described as "heads" or sometimes the camp inmates are compared to animals; for example, in *Auschwitz, Our Home* (A Letter), "the girls at the window are tender and desirable, but, like goldfish in an aquarium, unattainable" (2000, p. 243). In *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* the narrator says: "Now they push towards the opened door, breathing like fish cast out on the sand". Later in the same story, he describes dead infants being carried out from the train carriages as "chickens, holding several in each hand" (1976, p. 8).

However, readers come closer to recognizing the humanity of those who have perished, and those who tried to survive in an inhumane environment. Polish writers created a series of characters who looked the death in the eye, such as beautiful blonde girl in Borowski's text who decided that she did not want to be sent to the work camp and choses to die in the gas chamber. Avoidance of a shameful life at a concentration camp is ultimately the reason for her decision to contemplate sacrificing her life. This connection between the concept of fearlessness and her choice gives her death an idealistic appeal. There is a mixture of beauty and tragedy in her death.

A similar resonance completes *A World Apart* by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, where the former communist Michaił Kostylew committed suicide by pouring boiling water over his body. He caused his own death more directly but still expressed objection to reality (Stabro, 1997). Death as an option is present in the minds of many characters throughout war narratives. It is explained in the passage of *In a Demolished House*: "Grew up quickly. Died even faster. Not that they could experience the moral decomposition, which takes place in man, even during the most sacred of all wars" (1969).

Particularly important is making a sense of death, the ability to find an explanation for death and to make sense of its occurrence (Brosman, 1992). Hence the application of notions of nationalism and patriotism in the image of death in wartime. Literature rendered the death of soldiers as a symbol of the highest courage and sacrifice. Polish warriors were portrayed as those ready to die for their country – for their country to be reborn. The idea of suffering for the Polish nation was verbalized by many Polish writers. The fallen soldier was increasingly linked to the highest aspirations of patriotic nationalism.

Bushidō

Bushidō, the way of the warrior, was the martial and spiritual code that 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, p. 109). This suggest that the great importance was attached to the circumstances of death. In *Hagakure* – also known as *The Book of the Samurai* – a text that codifies the martial code written 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, p. 17). Indeed, the ideal samurai warrior was supposed to be fearless in the face of death. Nowadays, as noted by Inazo Nitobé, *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.

The primary aesthetic concept at the heart of traditional Japanese culture is harmony with nature. This mode of Shinto thinking is a crucial component that is current in *bushidō*. The point made here is that a Samurai is not different from a blossom: from among flowers the cherry blossom; from among men the samurai. The cherry blossom (*sakura*) is a cultural icon tied to a wide swath of romantic and nostalgic imagery. The glorious death of the warrior is frequently identified with the cherry blossom. In contemporary Japanese literature, such a portrayal applies not only to soldiers, but also to civilians. As in *Summer flowers* by Hara Tamiki (1985):

> "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 dried joined them...she stretched out her legs listlessly, oblivious to the dying girls" (p. 49).

Furthermore, Tamiki draws attention to the terrible beauty of the scenery after the atomic bombing and then emphasized this image through a comparison to surreal art (1985):

> "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 seem 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." (p. 51)

This parallel gives death an emotional appeal. Amidst this destruction and tragic loss of life, death is described as beautiful (Treat, 1995).

In 1967 Akiyuki Nosaka published *Grave of the Fireflies*, a story of two children from the port city of Kobe, which provided a reinterpretation of this nihilistic view of death and destiny. It starts with the premise that the main characters must die and the story follows the path to their certain death. As is illustrated in the text's opening lines: "September 21, 1945…That was the night I died". This shows a pervasive tone of powerlessness from the very beginning of the text, but also presents the fearless acceptance of one's own death.

The emphasis of passivity and victimhood is further shown in the symbolism of the fireflies that are shown throughout the story. The use of fireflies is one of the only events that signifies joy, "but they also symbolizes the fires that burned Japan and the

lives that were lost during the war" (Goldberg, 2009, p. 42). The night after Setsuko died, around Seita an enormous group of fireflies appears:

> "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." (p. 463)

The *Grave of the Fireflies* displays also the tenets of *bushidō* through its portrayal of children's father, a naval Captain. He serves as a symbol of Japanese masculinity – in Seita's memory he is presented as tall man, dressed in uniform. According to his children, he is a honorable person who will take revenge for their suffering. Unfortunately, after Japan has surrendered to the Allied Powers, Seita's father is probably dead. This information is not stated directly in the passage but is expressed through the symbol of drowned Japan's navy. This indicates Seita and Setsuko's father absolute loyalty to the emperor and the country. It has been acknowledged that courage and honor lie at the very heart of Japanese culture.

The Continuity of a Tradition

To summarize, a consideration of the military set of ethics in both Poland and Japan seems essential in analyzing the image of death in war literature. This article presents to what extent command values and moral principles have inspired the aesthetic approach towards 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 the need for a restoration of values. The years of the World War II brought once again a renaissance of the traditional appreciation that was associated with patriotic thinking. If we look into presented stories we will see roots in ancient cults of warriors. It was conducive to the development of a positive image of battlefield death in literary output. In this context, ideological aspects play a very important role of communicating certain attitudes and values which are desirable in a society. The warrior ethos has attracted generations of young people to the military life. Soldiers know that they may die in the battle, and the armed forces must create values that will protect their psyches from the impending danger of the conflict. For the civilians such a role is played by the aesthetic representation of battlefield death in literature.

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