



# THE MORAL DIMENSION OF LITERARY STUDIES: THE CASE OF TADEUSZ BOROWSKI'S<sup>1</sup> TESTIMONIES

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LA DIMENSIÓN MORAL DE LOS ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS:  
EL CASO DE LOS TESTIMONIOS DE TADEUSZ BOROWSKI



Por

**Jorge Acero Portilla**

MSc Comparative Literature

The University of Edinburgh

[jard90@gmail.com](mailto:jard90@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the moral dimension of literary studies in dealing with the literary representations of the horrors of the Holocaust. It discusses Elie Wiesel's (1977) stance on the matter, for whom the literary treatment of Auschwitz entails something intrinsically immoral. This paper questions to what extent his viewpoint leads to a mystification of such horrors, which may thwart the literary exploration and scholarly discussion of tales such as Tadeusz Borowski's testimonies. In that sense, it is proposed that literary criticism may provide the theoretical framework to inform a moral approach to analyse the Holocaust literature. In addition, it is suggested that, following Wiesel (1977), those testimonies engender a new literary genre, this is, a new writer-reader pact in which certain moral and emotional attitudes towards the narration are expected from both parts involved. In order to support this hypothesis, Borowski's "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" (1946) is examined, focusing on its narrative perspective, a perspective that underscores the moral crisis triggered by the horrors of the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** holocaust, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, literary criticism.



**Resumen:** Este documento explora la dimensión moral de los estudios literarios al tratar las representaciones literarias de los horrores del holocausto. Discute La postura de Elie Wiesel (1977) sobre el asunto, para quien el tratamiento literario de Auschwitz entraña algo intrínsecamente inmoral. Este artículo cuestiona en qué medida su punto de vista lleva a una mistificación de tales horrores, lo que puede frustrar la exploración literaria y la discusión académica de relatos como los testimonios de Tadeusz Borowski. En ese sentido, se propone que la crítica literaria pueda proporcionar el marco teórico para informar un enfoque moral para analizar la literatura del Holocausto. Además, se sugiere que, siguiendo a Wiesel (1977), esos testimonios susciten un nuevo género literario, esto es, un nuevo pacto escritor-lector en el que se esperan ciertas actitudes morales y emocionales hacia la narración por parte de ambas partes involucradas. En función de dar soporte a esta hipótesis, se examina «This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen» (1946) de Borowski, enfocándose en su perspectiva narrativa, una perspectiva que subraya la crisis moral provocada por los horrores del Holocausto.

**Palabras clave:** holocausto, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, crítica literaria.

When discussing the literature inspired by the Holocaust, it seems tempting to quote Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that deems writing poetry after Auschwitz as a barbaric act. It is so tempting that such quote has become a commonplace leading to great confusion. As Alex Thomson (2006) notes it, Adorno's aphorisms should not be regarded as conclusions. Indeed, isolating one sentence of the German philosopher's cryptic prose from the rest of the text risks jeopardising its original meaning. This appears to be the case of that quote that has been employed to illustrate the line of thought that sustains that it is immoral to give a literary treatment to the events related to the Holocaust. However, Thomson suggests that Adorno's thought points to a different direction by questioning the possibility of the existence of art and culture in the context of Western society. It is not that Adorno doubts the possibility and morality of writing poetry *about* Auschwitz, but rather that he is sceptical about the possibility of culture itself, "culture" here understood as the social construct opposed to the brutal state of nature. In other words, what endangers the possibility of culture is not the Holocaust as a historical event, but the fact that certain historical and social conditions made Auschwitz possible.

What is more interesting to us is not Adorno's cultural criticism, but the mystifying approach of certain authors and critics who regard the Holocaust as a non-transmissible experience, this is, an inaccessible event that can only be understood by its victims. The best exponent of this mythmaking perspective is perhaps Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz who wrote a vast and well-reputed oeuvre dealing with the Holocaust. According to Wiesel, any literary endeavour depicting the concentration camps is deemed to fail, although it is worth noting that his main objections were related to the fictional treatment of the Holocaust<sup>2</sup>. He claims that language is unable to represent the horror ("After Auschwitz, words are no longer innocent" [1977, p. 8]), arguing that literature is unable to depict "a situation which goes beyond its very description" (p. 7). But his main point is that the literary treatment of the Holocaust is an immoral act, questioning the use of the indescribable suffering for literary purposes: "Wouldn't that mean, then, that Treblinka and Belzec, Ponar and Babi Yar all ended in fantasy, in words, in beauty, that it was simply a matter of literature?" (p. 7). Therefore, for him, there is something ethically dubious about the aestheticization of the horror.

Consequently, this approach embodied by Wiesel's stance leaves little room to literary studies of the Holocaust, resulting in an uncritical dealing with the works of authors such as Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Anne Frank, Jerzy Kosinski, Viktor Frankl, Jorge Semprún, Patrick Modiano, Imre Kertész, among many others. One of the subsequent dangers of this is embodied by Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (1996), which initially had a favourable reception among critics and readers. Claiming to be an account of the memories of the extermination camps, Wilkomirski's book

was found to be a fraud as he never was a Holocaust victim. The unveiling of this scam reveals the necessity of a critical approach that analyses this literature without dismissing the historical, ethical and political specificities of the Holocaust. Hence, I must warn my reader that my purpose is not to downplay in any way the victim's suffering of such a catastrophic experience. My aim is to offer a more balanced view that allows us to see how literary theory can lend itself to understand the literature of the Holocaust in its historical, social, political, and moral specificity. My hypothesis is that literary theory not only provides us with the conceptual framework and theoretical tools to understand these tales, but it is a moral imperative to employ literary criticism to lead a scholar debate regarding the moral crisis triggered by the horrors of the Holocaust and their literary representation. To this end, I will discuss Wiesel's suggestion that the testimony is a new literary genre by analysing the new pact between writers and readers inaugurated by this type of literature, while examining Tadeusz Borowski's "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" (1976) in terms of its narrative perspective. I will argue that such a perspective entails a moral attitude that it is unique to the code of ethics underpinning Auschwitz.



## The realistic approach and its risks

In proposing a more balanced approach than the mystifying vision I earlier outlined, we must be aware of some difficulties posed by the literature of the Holocaust. There will be certain questions or, rather, certain paradoxes that will remain unsolved. This degree of uncertainty, I hope, will not debunk our discussion, but it will enrich it. According to Ruth Franklin (2011), this more balanced approach (this scholar employs the term “realistic approach”) lies in the idea that the Holocaust can be studied and understood using the regular means of scholarly investigation. This will imply to accept the literary production about the Holocaust, while at the same time facing an ethical issue: following Lawrence L. Langer (1975), there seems to be something morally unsettling about transforming the suffering of the victims into art for the sake of the aesthetic pleasure of a world that partook in the physical and symbolic extermination of those who perished in the camps. Wiesel’s reproach in this regard is eloquent as we run the risk of insulting the dead.

In addition, Langer warns us that art may impose an erroneous understanding of the horror, as though the suffering of the victims and the events that took place in the Holocaust had a coherent sense. It might be argued, though, that Auschwitz was not an “irrational aberration in an otherwise orderly world” (Thompson, 2006; p. 85), but the expression and culmination of a certain state of affairs that prompted it. This seems to be in tandem with Wiesel’s denunciation that “[f]or the factories of death to emerge and function, philosophers and psychologists, scholars and engineers, attorneys and aristocrats, lovers of art and poetry, criminals and sadists had to join forces” (1977; p. 6). Thus, adopting a mystical approach is inconvenient because assuming that the Holocaust was not part of the historical continuum impedes its understanding.

Putting forward a realistic approach entails undertaking the double task of defying the silence with which the rest of the world permitted the atrocities of the Holocaust, while avoiding trivialising the suffering of the victims. In this sense, literary studies can provide the conceptual tools to humanise the pain that these tales attempt to depict. Or, at least, a serious and committed scholarly work can explore the ethical dimension of that pain underscoring the moral crisis concomitant with the horrors of Auschwitz. What is more, regarding the written accounts of the Holocaust as literature, however outrageous it may seem, is unavoidable. After all, as Franklin (2011) puts it, “[e]very act of memory is also an act of narrative” (p. 12). By the same token, the Holocaust survivors resort to literary conventions and devices to compose their texts. Despite Levi’s claims that Auschwitz inmates created a new language, their accounts cannot escape from the literary tradition of forging narrators and characters, employing metaphors, analogies, and irony, creating sequences and scenes, etc. Furthermore, Wiesel’s preoccupations regarding the inadequacy of language to depict the reality echo the same concerns of post-structuralist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel

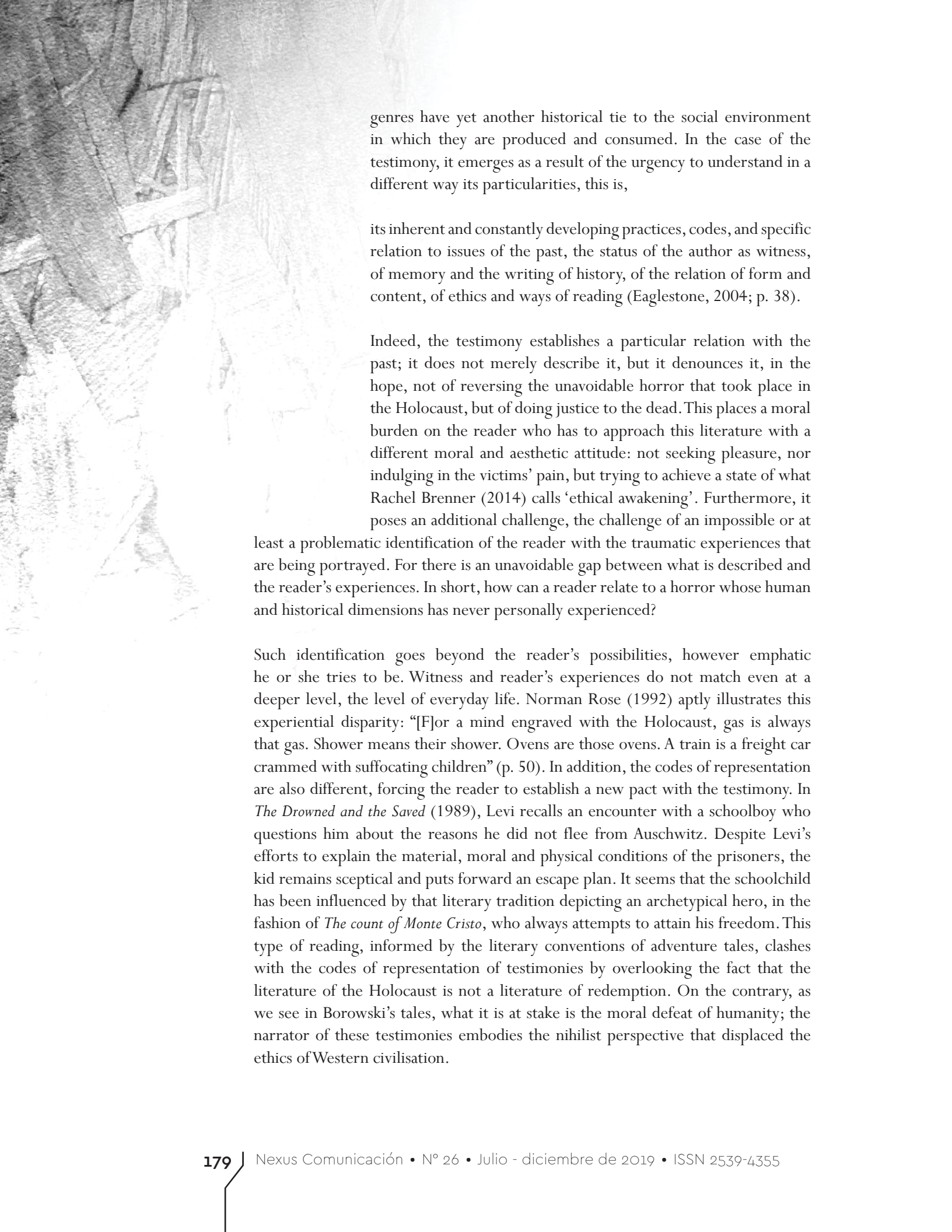
Foucault. Although we can point out these and other similarities, we must not lose sight of the specificities of the Holocaust: on the one hand, the nature of the divorce between language and reality that Derrida, Barthes or Foucault suggest is semiotic; on the other, Levi and Wiesel's distrust of words takes a moral turn: "our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say winter and they are different things" (Levi, 1959; p. 144). That is precisely the key to a committed study of the literature of the Holocaust, namely, the thorough examination of these texts considering their moral, political and historical particularities, a literary study that does not disrespect the dead nor perpetuates the silence of the onlookers or the perpetrators.

For this literature does not only deal with the material extermination of the other, but it also underlines the moral crisis of humanity. As a consequence, the assessment we are compelled to undertake concerns the aesthetics of these testimonies in the context of a moral response to the atrocities of the Holocaust. The means of expression of this literature are not simply a literary glamorisation of the horror, but they portray the moral ambiguity of the victims, survivors and executioners. As we will see later, the narrative perspective in Borowski's tales demonstrates to what extent the moral standards of empathy are substituted for a new ethics of survival, which clashes with the morality of other characters of the text, and, of course, with the morality of the reader.

### **Testimony as a Genre**

"If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (Wiesel, 1977; p. 9). Taken lightly, Wiesel's suggestion can sound like an overstatement, particularly because testimonies were widely written and read prior Auschwitz. Nevertheless, what is particular about testimonies about the Holocaust is that they inaugurate a new pact between writers and readers that must be analysed in the light of the contemporary theory of genre. Genre, as Robert Eaglestone (2004) puts it, is a manner to characterise how the act of reading takes place. In this sense, more than a prescriptive agent that categorises literary works by their common features, genre should be understood, following Suradech Chotiudompant (2001), as an explanatory instrument informing the reader's 'horizon of expectations', as well as providing authors with the generic conventions to compose their works. In other words, genre is a guideline for writers and readers to better understand literary texts.

Inasmuch as it is a fluid relationship between writers and readers, genre is bound up to its historical context: genres surge, evolve, and disappear, responding to intertextual relations established between literary works. It is in this vein that a text can transform a genre from within by slightly changing literary tradition or drastically breaking up with it. Nevertheless, apart from the tradition they belong,



genres have yet another historical tie to the social environment in which they are produced and consumed. In the case of the testimony, it emerges as a result of the urgency to understand in a different way its particularities, this is,

its inherent and constantly developing practices, codes, and specific relation to issues of the past, the status of the author as witness, of memory and the writing of history, of the relation of form and content, of ethics and ways of reading (Eaglestone, 2004; p. 38).

Indeed, the testimony establishes a particular relation with the past; it does not merely describe it, but it denounces it, in the hope, not of reversing the unavoidable horror that took place in the Holocaust, but of doing justice to the dead. This places a moral burden on the reader who has to approach this literature with a different moral and aesthetic attitude: not seeking pleasure, nor indulging in the victims' pain, but trying to achieve a state of what Rachel Brenner (2014) calls 'ethical awakening'. Furthermore, it poses an additional challenge, the challenge of an impossible or at least a problematic identification of the reader with the traumatic experiences that are being portrayed. For there is an unavoidable gap between what is described and the reader's experiences. In short, how can a reader relate to a horror whose human and historical dimensions has never personally experienced?

Such identification goes beyond the reader's possibilities, however emphatic he or she tries to be. Witness and reader's experiences do not match even at a deeper level, the level of everyday life. Norman Rose (1992) aptly illustrates this experiential disparity: "[F]or a mind engraved with the Holocaust, gas is always that gas. Shower means their shower. Ovens are those ovens. A train is a freight car crammed with suffocating children" (p. 50). In addition, the codes of representation are also different, forcing the reader to establish a new pact with the testimony. In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989), Levi recalls an encounter with a schoolboy who questions him about the reasons he did not flee from Auschwitz. Despite Levi's efforts to explain the material, moral and physical conditions of the prisoners, the kid remains sceptical and puts forward an escape plan. It seems that the schoolchild has been influenced by that literary tradition depicting an archetypical hero, in the fashion of *The count of Monte Cristo*, who always attempts to attain his freedom. This type of reading, informed by the literary conventions of adventure tales, clashes with the codes of representation of testimonies by overlooking the fact that the literature of the Holocaust is not a literature of redemption. On the contrary, as we see in Borowski's tales, what it is at stake is the moral defeat of humanity; the narrator of these testimonies embodies the nihilist perspective that displaced the ethics of Western civilisation.

It is precisely at this point that the testimony inaugurates, urges for, a new pact between writers and readers. It is also at this point that a literary investigation can give us the clues to understand this new pact in its moral and aesthetic implications. What are the author's duties when composing a testimony? What are the audience's responsibilities when reading it? As for the writer, Wiesel (1977) states that those who have been witnesses have the moral obligation to "bear testimony for the future" (p. 9), conveying the messages and the suffering of the dead to the living. Here, a literary discussion arises: is the testimony at odds with fiction? Wiesel, as we have seen before, would argue against the literary treatment of memory. However, it is worth noting that this author wrote fictional novels dealing with the Holocaust<sup>3</sup>. What is more, Borowski employs fictional elements in his tales. Franklin (2011) observes that, according to Borowski's fellow-prisoners, the author's behaviour at Auschwitz diverges from that of the narrator as described in "The People Who Walked on" or "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen". On the one hand, Tadeusz Borowski, the author, displayed a heroic conduct in the camps, being a 'model of comradeship'; on the other, Tadek, the narrator, behaves egotistically driven by his cynicism.

Does this fictional narrator undermine the truth depicted in Borowski's testimony? Although this seems a legitimate question, I believe that this literary licence does not undercut the authenticity of the horrors described in those tales. Conversely, this fictional character serves the purpose of effectively presenting the Holocaust in its philosophical and ethical dimensions by describing the traumatic events and, more importantly, conveying his ideas and moral perspective. Moreover, it is the reader who ultimately grants the status of testimony to the text by partaking in what Philip Lejeune (1988) calls "the autobiographical pact". In this pact, the writer must commit, not to giving a perfect historical account of the events represented (such pretension goes beyond any literary endeavour), but to making a genuine effort to portray his or her personal experiences. As for the reader, he or she must interpret the text respecting the writer's effort to communicate their memories, while confronting the difficulties of the identification we have mentioned above. If a total identification is impossible, then the reader must show empathy towards the victims in an effort to re-humanise the horror they went through. This display of empathy is a symbolic gesture that can only be done through imagination. Yes, the vindication of the pain of the Holocaust victims is only imaginary, but, as said by Franklin (2011), "[t]he act of imagination [...] is an act of empathy" (p. 15). Ultimately, this is the new pact between writers and readers that the genre of testimony has inaugurated.

### **Borowski's narrative and moral perspective**

The analysis of Borowski's tales is at once a literary and moral undertaking or, rather, their literary study has a pervasive and ineluctable moral dimension. Therefore, their aesthetic examination, as well as the assessment of any of their narrative elements, must take into account their ethical implications. After all, his testimony is the



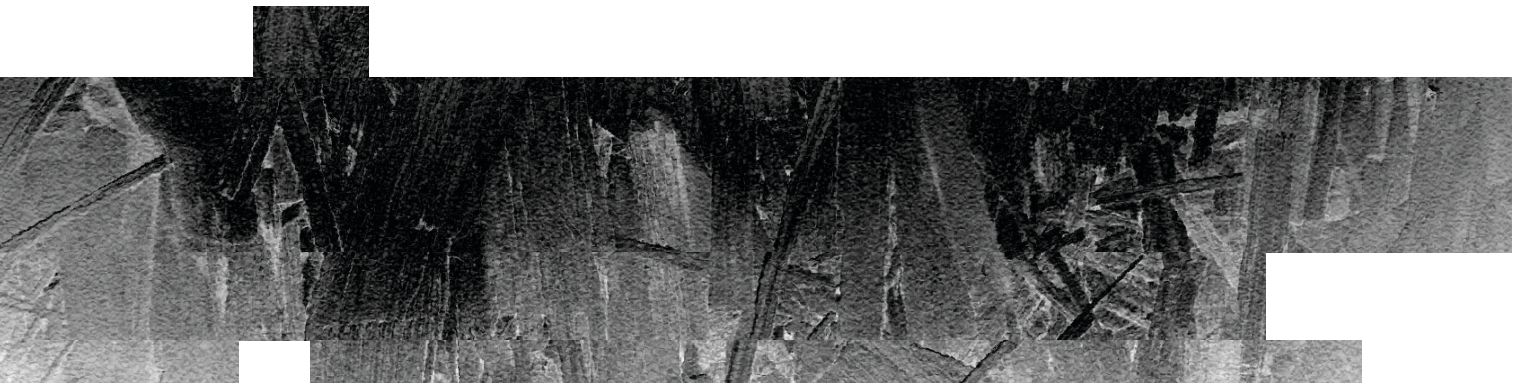
testimony of the horrors of Auschwitz as much as it is the testimony of the moral crisis of the extermination camps. His narrative perspective is a crucial point in two main aspects. First, Borowski was a non-Jewish political prisoner, which put him in a privileged position with respect to his Jewish fellow-inmates: he was allowed to have correspondence with his family and receive packages with food from outside the camp. What is more, his life was not threatened by the gas chamber. Second, he was a survivor among millions who did perish. In this regard, Levi (1989) asserts that only the worst among the Auschwitzers survived, whereas the best of them lost their lives. For survival depended upon behaving following a particular code of ethics that erased any trace of kindness and empathy. In other words, the prisoners have to become victimizers themselves in order to survive.

Borowski was aware of the morality imposed by the circumstances of the camp. Jan Kott (1976) quotes a review written by the Polish author about another book addressing Auschwitz that reads as follows:

The first duty of the Auschwitzers is to make clear just what a camp is... But let them not forget that the reader will unfailingly ask: But how did it happen that you survived?... Tell, then, how you bought places in the hospital, easy posts, how you shoved the 'Moslems' [prisoners who had lost the will to live] into the oven, how you bought women, men, what you did in the barracks, unloading the transports, at the gypsy camp; tell about the loneliness of every man. But write that you, you were the ones who did this. That a portion of the sad fame of Auschwitz belongs to you as well (p. 11).

The cruelty of which Borowski accuses himself is painfully described in "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" (1976). Not only does the narrator named Tadek relate the horrors of the extermination of Jews, their moral and physical degradation, but he also embodies the nihilism of the survivors enjoying all the privileges of the non-Jewish prisoners. At the beginning of the story, Tadek is eating bread among other delicacies with his friend Henri, a fat Frenchman, on the top the wooden bunks in their barracks. The bread, Tadek recalls, was sent by his mother a week ago. The two friends talk about the trains full of prisoners that would come to the camps to be gassed. They fantasise about the numerous goods they will be able to obtain from the dead (e.g. champagne and shoes). Below them, and this is the first clear indication of the narrative perspective, there are naked Jews stinking of sweat and excrement. Among those less fortunate men, there is a rabbi who loudly reads from a prayer book. Someone asks him to shut up. However, one of those privileged inmates says "Let him rave. They'll take him to the oven that much sooner" (p. 85). Those who are exempt from death are in the position of disregarding the life of the doomed. In fact, the economy of survival depends on those trains coming, as Henry explains: "They can't run out of people, or we'll starve to death in this blasted camp. All of us live on what they bring" (p. 84). The life of others will not matter as much as a loaf of bread.

Shortly after, Tadek joins for the first time a group of prisoners called 'Canada', which is in charge of unloading the trains at the station. Their duty consists of taking out the corpses of babies and cleaning the excrements of the wagons, while taking all that can be useful for them, except for jewellery, money and gold, all of which is the property of the *Reich*. The Jews who arrive are divided into two groups: the group that will be immediately sent to the 'showers' (and subsequently to the crematorium), and those who, being healthy and young enough to endure forced labour, will defer their death. The operation of extermination is described by the narrator in a systematic and bureaucratic style; the doomed are carried in trucks heading to the gas chambers: "Trucks leave and return, without interruption, as on a monstrous conveyor belt. A Red Cross van drives back and forth, back and forth, incessantly: it transports the gas that will kill these people" (p. 90). This language tends to neutralise the horror, exposing the degree of professionalisation and mechanisation with which the genocide of Jewish people was conducted. This neutralisation seeks two effects: first, the objective description of the genocide; second, the reader's emotional shock as the cold and distant language does not seem to match the extent of the horror described.



Tadek philosophises about the etiquette observed by the Canada prisoners in performing their task. As the Jewish people who are taken to the trucks repeatedly ask what will happen to them, the Canada group eludes the question, because, as the narrator claims, "[i]t is the camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. This is the only permissible form of charity" (p. 89). Tadek, however, is far from being apologetic about the genocide. Christopher Bigsby (2006) argues that the narrator's account is not simply descriptive; it is a confession on Tadek's behalf but also on behalf of humanity in the emergence of a political consciousness opposed to the rationality of the camps. This rationality of survival is once again tested when a woman refuses to take care of her own child after leaving the train; bearing him in her arms would result in her being sent to the gas chambers. Then, another prisoner intervenes by hitting the woman: "Here! And take this with you, bitch!", shouts the inmate throwing the kid at her feet. On seeing this, a SS guard says "*Gut gemacht*, good work. That's the way to deal with degenerate mothers" (p.

94). The absurdity of the Auschwitz morality is taken to the extreme. The mother, who for her own sake denies her maternity, is severely punished by a prisoner who plays an active role in the extermination apparatus. This is just an example of the cynical attitude becoming the norm in the camps. Nihilism displaces any form of kindness or virtue.

The ethical tension continues to grow as the narrator encounters a good-looking girl who descends from the train. She asks Tadek where the Germans will take the Jews, but he is unable to answer. He then reflects on the possible fates she might face: the first is the degrading death of the gas chambers; the second would save her life, or at least delay her death, but at the cost of her unconditional submission to the Auschwitz code of ethics and its dehumanising rule in the concentration camps. The girl opts for the less humiliating option and goes straight to the trucks. This is a gesture of resistance; she vindicates her social agency in the context of human physical and moral destruction. But the redemption is impossible. The trains taking the Jews to their death will continue to come totalising fifteen thousand victims.

Tadek's narrative perspective reaches a moral dimension which a serious literary study cannot overlook. As a matter of fact, it is the literary investigation which allows us to fully understand his moral awakening. When he asks Henry "are we good people?" (p. 91) on seeing the horror at the train station, the question remains unanswered. In fact, this question is impossible to answer in a context in which human values have been suspended. It is a moral dilemma that is transposed to the reader: how can someone (regardless of being an executioner, witness or victim) be a good person in a culture that permitted Auschwitz? This philosophical interrogation is at stake in Borowski's work as it confronts us with the horror, and the moral ambiguity that gave way to the materialisation of the extermination camps. Ultimately, the scholarly work addressing these testimonies must employ its theoretical framework taking into account the specificities of the Holocaust in terms of its moral implications. Only in this way the literary treatment of these texts would not constitute an insult to the victims and their suffering. Moreover, granting the status of a new genre to the testimonies will ensure that the new pact between writers and readers leads to an act of empathy underpinned by a creative and literary effort to remember those who ignominiously perished. This is perhaps the only possible vindication against the horror.



## Notas

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- <sup>1</sup> Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951), Polish author who was arrested in 1943 by Nazi authorities following charges related to political activities. He was then sent to Auschwitz, experience that marked him profoundly. Tales such as *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1946) and *The People Who Walked On* (1946) account for his time at the extermination camp. Borowski committed suicide at the age of 28, only six years after being released.
- <sup>2</sup> It is also crucial to bear in mind that this essay specifically engages with Borowski's tales, which are classified as testimonies. This clarification is necessary in the light of the fact that there exist other literary genres dealing with the Holocaust in diverse literary forms, such as poetry, non-fictional biography, entirely fictional novels, and so forth.
- <sup>3</sup> It is true, though, that those novels were related to affairs other than the direct representation of Auschwitz or the horrors of other camps.

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