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A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production.

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A Holocaust Soap and the Story of Its Production

“I did not make up anything.”

Zofia Nalkowska on *Medallions*

“In Nalkowska everything is a construction.”

Michał Głowiński (not on *Medallions*)

“*Soap, Ladies and Gentlemen, die Seife, die Seifenkugel, you know, certainly, what it is.*”

Francis Ponge

Soap's *telos* is to purify, to clean and then to disappear completely. Its semantics should be in conflict with its impure origins, in the same manner in which its cleansing effect clashes with dirty hands. Contrary to Francis Ponge's assessment in the inscription, which is concerned with the cosmetic's phenomenological 'whatness,' consumers have only a vague idea of the contents of soap (including its main ingredient, animal fat) or the chemical process required to transform that coarse material into a pleasantly scented, neatly molded and packaged cosmetic.¹ Our consumption of soap is one of

¹ Although I am interested in the phenomenology of the soap as an object, its chemical processing deserves to be revealed briefly: “A cleansing and emulsifying agent that is made usually either from fats or oils by saponification with alkali in a boiling process or the cold process or from fatty acids by neutralization with alkali, that consists essentially of a mixture of water-soluble sodium or potassium salts of fatty acids, and that may contain other ingredients such as perfume, coloring agents, fluorescent dyes, disinfectants or abrasive material.” Webster's Third International Dictionary (1981), s.v., “soap.”

the least complex, and thus most overlooked, occurrences. The narrative of soap's consumption is brief and takes place entirely on the body's surface, between the skin and the pleasantly disappearing product.² The gist of this narrative can be contained in one sentence: the soap, made from an animal's body, washes another body – in other words, the body washes the body.

Considered by Sigmund Freud to be a “yardstick” of civilization,³ later soap was defined in nearly military terms of “a civilization's triumph over the forces of defilement and excrement.”⁴ But what, ladies and gentlemen, if a human body is washed by soap manufactured from the human body? Such an uncanny, and seemingly impossible, concept of the everyday artifact perverts the main trope of civilization to which the cosmetic traditionally belongs, since such soap dehumanizes one body in order to re-humanize another. As I will attempt to demonstrate, this kind of soap—its use, production, symbolization and network of cultural association in which it is entangled – represents a complex cultural text in that it embraces both the civilizational and anticivilizational impulses. Therefore, the story of its actual manufacture overlaps with my reconstructing the story of its cultural production.

The utilization of cadavers for educational and medical purposes has a long history, one that is often intermingled with unethical practices related to the provenance of the bodies. The Nazis who viewed the ideologically categorized body as fit for recycling obviously acted without obtaining consent as they used cadavers of those people whom they criminalized or considered racially inferior. Today's ethical standards allow the harvesting of organs and body parts *pro publico bono* only with the consent from the donor or his or her family. This understanding would render both present or historical practices of utilizing unclaimed bodies, as well as those of paupers and criminals, illegal, regardless of the purpose for which the body was used. This, however, was not the case, especially, when boiling, dissection, and display of bodily remnants coincided with the medieval Catholic cult of relics considered to be holy.

The implications of a human subject producing and using a cosmetic made from bodily matter retrieved and recycled from other human subjects without their consent draw us, then, into the sphere of ethics. In this case, however, the ethical proves to be entangled with less sublime questions – those of economics and the welfare of a society at war. Both aspects of the question prove to be conveniently intertwined with the promotion of economico-ethical happiness under the banner of distorted utilitarianism. Since 1789, when Jeremy Bentham published his *An Introduction to the Principles of*

² Soap was known in ancient civilizations (Pliny the Elder thought it was invented by Gauls), yet the story of its modern production, defined above, harks back only to the 19th vegetable oils (coconut, palm-kernel, etc.), but this type of raw material for saponification has been used for commercial production only since the 1950s.

³ S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 46.

⁴ L. Douglas, “The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald: Icons of Atrocity at Nuremberg,” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. B. Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 291.

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Morals and Legislation, utilitarian philosophy has evolved into several distinct strands, including the codification of utilitarianism into a normative theory of ethics. The British philosopher's promotion of ethics, calling for the overall happiness of both the agent of an action and everyone affected by this action, privileges results over methods. Utilitarianism's teleological character, neatly opposed to deontological ethical theories concerned with moral duties and obligations instead of with goals and ends, eventually evolved into present-day consequentialism. We can trace the utilitarian underpinnings of a variety of 20th century developments, in the realms of economics, social sciences, and yes, politics. The misapplied utilitarian doctrine of motivation, privileging ends above means, would vindicate many dictators and their followers, including such Nazi scientists as Professor Rudolf Maria Spanner.

In that he used human corpses for the production of soap, Dr. Spanner's research represents one of most notorious cases of the recycling of the human body for utilitarian purposes. In reconstructing the story of this experimental, scientific production, I mainly rely on Zofia Nałkowska's "Professor Spanner," the opening reportage in her collection entitled *Medaliony* [Medallions]. As far as I know, Nałkowska's reportage, although translated into more than twenty languages, has never existed as a significant point of reference in the discourse outside of Poland. Nałkowska, best known for several of her pre-war psychological novels, was also actively engaged in socio-political questions. It was her work on behalf of political prisoners in Towarzystwo Opieki nad Więźniami [The Association of the Care of Prisoners], which resulted in the collection of reportages entitled *Ściany świata* [The Walls of the World, 1931] that is directly related to *Medallions*. After the caesura of WWII, Nałkowska remained active in a variety of official functions and published, most notably, she worked as a member of on the Committee for Researching Hitlerite Crimes, collecting former Nazi victims' testimonies, taking field trips to death camps and other sites of the genocide such as Spanner's lab. *Medallions* recorded her continued engagement on behalf of the silenced victims.

The understated content of "Professor Spanner" is framed by historical facts: together with a crew of lab assistants, prep workers, and medical students in the forensic laboratory of the Danzig medical school, Dr. Spanner recycled human fat into soap. As the Soviet Army advanced, Dr. Spanner, avoiding his scientific, moral, and technical responsibility, fled to the western part of Germany.⁵ Since he did not kill people in order to make soap and could have been prosecuted only for removing evidence, his *numéro savon*⁶

⁵ After the war, only two members of his laboratory staff, compromised as collaborators, were arrested and interrogated by the Soviet and Polish secret police, as well as by the Main Committee for Researching Hitlerite Crimes, which included among its members Nałkowska. A German prosecutor, who interrogated Spanner in 1948, dropped the case against the doctor. During the investigation, Spanner denied making such soap; his denial was consistent with the fact that he treated his wartime experiments in soap production as a secret operation disguised as a manufacture of anatomical specimens for medical students.

⁶ As Nałkowska put it in her *Dzienniki* [Diaries] VI 1945-1954, Part I (1945-1948), ed. H. Kirchner, (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2000), VI: 450.

turned out to be a classic case of the divide between juridical and ethical law, a divide that effectively enabled him to avoid punishment.⁷

During the Nuremberg trials, Soviet prosecutor L.N. Smirnov submitted a bar of soap allegedly made of human fat understanding that this item demonstrated important legal evidence that the industrial production of human soap, contrary to the fact that Spanner's manufacture was not able to mass produce the cosmetic. Subsequently, survivors,⁸ activists of such stature as Simon Wiesenthal, as well as certain historians maintained that the soap was made of human fat.⁹ Later on, the fact was dismissed as not based on reality. However, the investigation was reactivated under the aegis of the National Remembrance Institute in Poland.¹⁰ When, thanks to the German prosecutors, an extant soap sample (considered lost) was discovered in the Hague archives, a series of tests was conducted.¹¹ They confirmed that Spanner's soap was made from human fat and, ultimately, corroborated the facts reported by Nałkowska.

From a historical distance of more than half a century, we see that one of the Holocaust's projects was to transform or negate the presence of cultural traces, archival materials, material remainders of massacres, vestiges of crematoria and, in sum, to blot out all traces of life, death, and even traces of traces. Texts of the Holocaust, as testimonial traces, contain descriptions of transformational processes that question the durability and resistance of both bodily matter and material objects. The question that comes to mind is that of how long a man remains a man, how long after death his body continues to be a vessel of human content. Nałkowska represented the stages of transformation of the body as a pseudo-scientific and violent spectacle, juxtaposing the anonymity of fat to the bodily forms, often fragmented, but still bearing vestiges of human shapes.

The Holocaust subjugated both material objects and human corpses to the recycling process, whose first stage rendered them ontologically equal. Manufacturing soap from human fat represented an extreme example of the transformational model, according to which both the surface and the core of the individual body are metamorphosed and processed beyond recognition. Both human-made and organic matter were made

⁷ Aside from Spanner himself, numerous Holocaust revisionists deny that the production of soap from human fat ever took place; one can find an abundance of information about the subject on the Web; for example, Mark Weber, an American historian who denies the Holocaust writes that reports about human fat soap were mere Holocaust propaganda.

⁸ The production of such soap was mentioned by two Czech prisoners, O. Kraus and E. Kulka, in their book *Noc a mlha*. Additional evidence was provided by the British prisoners of war J. H. Witton and W. Neely, who installed the machinery in Spanner's lab.

⁹ Among others, W. L. Shirer, the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and E. Raab, the author of *Anatomy of Nazism* (1983) repeated the claim concerning the soap.

¹⁰ The Polish prosecutor who, in 2005, opened the case against the late Spanner, also found him not guilty of any crime. The only direct result of the revised case was a plaque mounted on the lab's façade to commemorate the unwilling subjects of this research.

¹¹ The soap also contained caolin, likely added for better exfoliation.

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vulnerable as never before and were destined to be completely recycled, without any residual remainder. In the trajectory relating the permanence and impermanence of matter, a defining path for the Holocaust transformational paradigm, the intent to erase vestiges of raw material became paramount. In order to achieve this goal, recycling occurred to various degrees.

Although at the beginning of Spanner's operation, the corpses he processed were Jewish, towards the end of the war, he used racially and ethnically diverse corpses for his experiments. In general, the processing of corpses speaks both of a perverted utilitarianism and of a certain shift in the Nazi approach to the Jewish body. The Nazi vision of the perfect society excluded the supposedly dangerous, effeminate, and diseased Jewish body. In order to create and substantiate this racist formulation, the Nazis drew on a mixture of medieval conceptions and aspects of modern philosophy that they buttressed with deviant scientific claims. Its central principle was the necessity of a complete removal of the Jewish body from society. But once the project of eliminating the revolting body was moved from the level of ideology into that of its practical realization, in particular after the Wansee conference, another shift took place. During this stage, the Jewish corpse was endowed with a set of new, yet opposite, qualities. When death removed the threat and disgust that the body represented, new traits were inscribed on the corpse through its treatment. On the one hand, being a mere husk inside which was hidden sought-after Jewish gold, the body was useless. On the other hand, it became a locus of diverse resources, even a commodity in itself. With this radical change – characteristic of the transformational paradigm to which the dead body was subjugated – its previously pronounced and targeted racial, cultural, ethnic essence, was completely erased. In this way, the assumed uselessness of the corpses, perceived only as objects, was replaced by a redefined use-value. Such a permissive resourcefulness, part of the larger Nazi utilitarianism, could only be facilitated by their overarching totalitarian power.

Upon closer scrutiny, the story of Spanner's production (and first attempts at circulation) of his variety of soap demonstrates denial and repression, both which were supported by any number of ideological rationalizations. The rationale given by one of the interrogated medical doctors (and his colleagues) revealed that it was "common knowledge that he was an obedient party member."¹² Moreover, as the other doctor indicated, "[a]t that time, Germans were experiencing a severe shortage of fat. Given Germany's economic state, he could have been tempted to do it for the good of the nation" (Nałkowska 2000, 10). Thus, Spanner's readiness was justified both by the Reich's economic demands and by his loyalty to the NSDAP.¹³ These testimonies – dull expressions of their false consciousness, delivered in front of the Committee – have a certain Conradian effect: the witnesses spoke of the antagonist Spanner in his absence, and in

¹² Z. Nałkowska, *Medallions*, trans. D. Kuprel (Evanston, IL., Northwestern University Press, 2000), 10.

¹³ R. J. Lifton's magisterial monograph *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of the Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) and M. H. Kater's *The Doctors under Hitler* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) are still the most comprehensive studies on the subject of Nazi medicine.

doing so, relativized the actual impact of his research. One articulated his utilitarian principle of improving the quality of life in the Third Reich, while the other defined him as a totalitarian subject. What is so extraordinary about the comment concerning his obedience to the party is the fact that it escaped the eye of another totalitarian subject – the Polish censor who accepted Nałkowska's *Medallions* for publication at the time when the Polish press was already under communist control.¹⁴ Thus censorship, understood as a part of a larger discourse on traces and obfuscation, appears on the fringes of her collection.

An erasure of what one may call historical documents was painfully familiar to Nałkowska, who, during the war, kept two diaries. In one, she wrote about everyday events, albeit deeply colored by the Nazi occupation: she describes her and her family's struggle for survival in Warsaw, her job in a small tobacco shop, and her writing and social life intertwined with sporadic visits to the countryside. The other diary was defined more strictly and kept completely secret, for she intended it to be an account of everything related to the persecution and extermination of the Jewish population. Since she likely knew and participated in conspiratorial rescue operations and underground cultural life, Nałkowska's knowledge about the unfolding extermination exceeded the vagueness of rumors that circulated in Warsaw and made her second diary particularly incriminating. She later burned these records in a stove, when Gestapo searched her apartment building, executing thusly the ultimate act of *prekarium* on her own work. The "auto-da-fe" of her diary was yet another act of self-protection and self-censorship performed under the pressure of life threatening circumstances, rather than an enactment of her inner desire. The destruction of her writings did not extend to her other wartime diaries which contained scarcer, more coded notes about the plight of Jews, usually referred to periphrastically as "the people behind the wall." The same attentive empathy with the plight of Jews, so characteristic of Nałkowska's wartime writings, is also visible throughout *Medallions*.¹⁵

Vagaries of the Scientific Self

Utilitarian morals were fused with the ideological semantics of the Nazis by means of a much older tradition of dehumanization, which treated the body as nothing more than reified meat. Julia Kristeva would consider such an approach to cadavers as an

¹⁴ I owe this observation to Samuel Sandler.

¹⁵ The collection was written almost entirely after the war, with the exception of "The Cemetery Lady." Among its seven reportages, this piece employs employs a *Jetztzeit* which differs from the post-war perspective Nałkowska applies elsewhere in the collection. Here the author deliberately retains the concreteness and contemporaneity of the lived experience in her conversation with an old, anti-semitic woman who takes care of some graves in the Catholic Powązki Cemetery located on edge of the Warsaw Ghetto walls. The reportage takes place in 1943, during the Ghetto Uprising, as Nałkowska visits her mother's grave and is in the close proximity to the ongoing killing on the other side of the wall.

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argument in support of her concept of the abject corpse as neither subject nor object.¹⁶ In the places of extermination and recycling, however, a corpse was only an object remotely reflecting its previous ontology. Spanner's lab serves as a case in point, in its role as a part of a smoothly-functioning war machine, whose executioners were eager to improve the mechanization of death. Following the installment of a guillotine in the Danzig prison, Spanner dealt with an abundance of "raw material" for his covert research. The recycling in Spanner's lab demonstrated this mechanized treatment in each of its steps. First, the cadavers were "halved, quartered, and skinned" (9); then, the bones were removed; and the so-called saponification concluded the process. The writer described its end result as "a whitish, rough soap" (9) formed in metal molds. Strikingly similar, providing both a parallel and a precedent for this commodification of the body, is the fragmentation of the animal body that occurs in the slaughterhouse. There, animals are killed, skinned, disemboweled, cut into pieces, boiled, smoked, and packed, all in the name of producing food for humans. For Daniel Pick, a slaughterhouse becomes the metaphor for a war that emphasized the division of labor and the speed with which the carcasses were processed.¹⁷ Each worker was responsible for a specific morsel of each carcass, such that the animal would never appear to the worker as a physical whole – but only in a multiplicity of identical parts from countless individual animals. The division of labor determined the slaughterhouse's similarity to an assembly line, where each worker played a small role in a precisely outlined process of assembly; however, instead of piecing together, the system employed in a slaughterhouse disconnected and undid an original bodily unity.

Division of labor governed the manufacture of soap in the Danzig institution and played an important role in the preservation of secrecy. According to Nałkowska, except for Spanner and two of his lab assistants, no one involved in manufacturing the soap observed or participated in the entire cycle, which began when the prisoners were led to the guillotine, followed by their execution and the collection and transportation of their bodies to the lab, where the eerie final artifact was produced. And yet this conceptualization does not account for the final stages of soap production, during which the fragmented body underwent a complete recycling and disappeared, so nothing even remotely reminiscent of the initial human form and substance remained. These stages prompted one of the reportage's main questions as to how long after death and the process of recycling the body continued to house human content and, moreover, was recognizable as human.

The uncanny connection between the war and meat production did not escape Nałkowska, who ruminated in her *Diary 1939-1944* about the link between the war machinery and those people who were caught in it, as though in a "meat grinding

¹⁶ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹⁷ "The individual must accomplish his or her specific action at a frenzied pace, often amidst a pool of blood." D. Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 184.

machine” (V: 305). While there is nothing particularly novel about this association,¹⁸ it resonated differently for this writer, in that, through it, she directly connected the concept of the self, anchored in the soma, with the meat that constituted her own diet only to undermine it with disbelief.¹⁹

It is strange that this – which makes me happen, through which I participate in the world, through which I feel myself – is *meat* (the meat brought from “town” for dinner).²⁰ Thinking about man in chemical categories can be borne easily. The fact that life “borrows” free elements of dead world, does not cause resistance; there is a quiet acceptance and understanding of it. But when viewed with the eye of “naïve realism,” meat as an organ of life and consciousness, as the site where the sweetness and horror of life occur—what an arbitrariness, what a perfunctory concept (*Diaries* V: 490).

Dialectical materialism, which Nałkowska embraced in her youth (although not in any orthodox manner), eventually took a form of monism in her writings. She was convinced that, in a strictly biological sense, there was no ontological difference between nature and humanity. As she claimed in an interview in the 1930’s: “Man is made more or less of the same material as the world; he is con-generic with it.”²¹ In a later response, the writer modified her biological monism somewhat by including an ideological element from her formative period: the belief in science. The fusion of dialectical materialism with a scientific approach to reality motivated her proclaim, with what would seem now an inflated sense of optimism, a radical faith in the “Soviet experiment” and its limitless, scientific progress:

Considered at this angle the future and durability of the Soviet experiment seems to me to depend on whether “matter,” as a gnoseological category, will prove – so to speak – its developmental capacity, its capacity to adapt to the ever more stunning discoveries within hard science, blowing up the essence and quality of matter as the subject of physics.²²

Inspired by scientific research in its Soviet instantiation, and as though intoxicated by the prospect of future technological advancement, Nałkowska displayed no foreboding about the effects of its deployment against mankind. This prewar ideology – of a materialist cognition without ethical safeguards – would return like a boomerang in her *Medallions*.

¹⁸ After all, the cynical expression “mięso armatnie” [meat fodder] functions in many languages.

¹⁹ Even prior to the war, Nałkowska observed that a fish farm was a sort of a concentration camp.

²⁰ Emphasis in the original.

²¹ S. Essmanowski, “Dialogi akademickie. Rozmowa z Zofią Nałkowską” [Academic dialogues: A conversation with Zofia Nałkowska], *Pion* 10 (1934), quoted after E. Frąckowiak-Więgantowa, *Sztuka powieściopisarska Nałkowskiej (Lata 1935-1954)* [Nałkowska’s Art of the Novel (Years 1935- 1954)], (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1975).

²² This is a passage from Nałkowska’s contribution to the 1933 survey entitled “Polish Writers and Soviet Russia” conducted by *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News]; quoted by Frąckowiak-Więgantowa.

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Curiously enough, in defining material unity, Nałkowska never engaged dialectical materialism in her own fiction. As observed by Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, the writer overlooked the idea of her characters' material/somatic foundation, focusing instead on their psychological dimension and interactions with the world. *Medallions* is an obvious exception. Here, stories of cannibalism, torture, starvation, horrible wounds, and beatings bring the suffering body, in all its mortal materiality, into the narrative foreground. In this collection, Nałkowska revises not only the bio-ontological position of the human subject; she also modifies the world, which framed these subject in terms of a radical corpo-reality.

Nałkowska's voicing a futuristic trust in physics and its transformation of matter, occurred several years before her carefully measured reportage from Spanner's lab. It almost overlapped in time with the monistic theses she articulated in her wartime diary. As such, these claims also marked an important direction in her thinking about the limitations of human cognition. However, the writer did not connect them, perhaps leaving this aspect up to the readers to decide. It was as if the ethical consequences of Spanner's activities made them incompatible with human cognition, in general, and scientific knowledge, in particular.

Had she consistently revised the concept of homogeneity of matter, would Nałkowska then adopt utilitarianism and, in its name, vindicate Professor Spanner, who obviously chose not to distinguish between human and animal *soma*? Or would her position remain irresolvable on account of the apparent split in ethical, juridical and scientific reasoning? Had she connected her prewar vision of the 'blown-up matter' with the postwar construction and usage of the atomic bomb, would she condemn one or the other? As far as we know, she did not find it necessary to revise her own scientific fetishes, including her concept of somatic homogeneity, which troubled her so much during wartime.²³ Nazi experimentation in human recycling, in which the separation of the somatic and the individual (human) became obsolete, was a direct challenge to Nałkowska's scientific ideology. She posed the question and cannot be blamed for not finding an answer to this problems.

'Meat in the Pot'

Nałkowska's reportage was conceived of as a passage through the uncanny underground facility that constituted Spanner's lab. First, the narrator, already familiar with the premises, conveyed to the reader a confused sensation that something was fundamentally wrong with the place. Spanner's facility looked like an abandoned forensic lab with corpses lying in various configurations and shapes. Only later was the site's true function disclosed to the reader, as the passage through the basement revealed the gradual

²³ With the exception of a brief passage in the article „Nowe żądania“ [New Demands], published in *Kuźnica*, in which the writer seems to accept the dangers inherent in modern science: „Science does not stop its experiments at the moment when their paths seem to go off the straight lines and utilitarian directions.“ Z. Nałkowska, *Widzenia dalekie i bliskie* [Visions Close and Distant], (Warszawa: PIW, 1957), 72.

dismantling of the corpses into parts: shaved heads in one place, flayed skin in another, a boiled torso further down. And, as the body was becoming more and more fragmented, the incriminating evidence of Spanner's research became insurmountable. This feeling coincided with the construction of the passage, from the ground level to the basement, as an archetypal descent to the underworld (*katabasis*); as a passage from the solemn to the abject, from the highest to the vulgarized, from the whole to the fragmented, from an aporia of the place to a recognition of its function. The site ultimately disclosed its dead corporeal reality – its corpo-reality.

Although Nałkowska's description of this site integrates several textual and visual traditions, the parallel with a slaughterhouse/meat-processing factory, as a workplace ruled by mechanized neutralization of ethics, becomes particularly apt. The uniformity of the images of a mechanized, serialized death stunned the writer because each cadaver had a clean cut on the neck, signifying the violation of the body. For Nałkowska, this line was too perfect, too precise – to the extent that she perceived the preserved corpses as made of stone. Only later would the technological cause of that neatness become clear to her: it was the guillotine blade that made such a disquietingly neat cut.

Elias Canetti made the gruesome remark that seeing a heap of corpses is an ancient spectacle; he outlined the way in which such an event empowers the victorious and satisfies the powerful. However, that ancient sight was not what Nałkowska reported from Danzig. Not quite. Her experience there modified Canetti's observation, emphasizing the difference that existed between *any* dead body and a dead body that has been quartered and boiled. This distinction between the spectacles of dehumanization became obvious to the visitors only when they came across a cauldron containing a dismembered and boiled human torso: "There, on the cooled hearth, stood a huge cauldron brimming with a dark liquid. Someone familiar with premises poked under the lid and retrieved a boiled human torso, skinned and dripping with the liquid" (4). This dark liquid – fat – was what interested Spanner most.²⁴ Usually, fat connotes the interiority of the body; however, its exteriorized and liquified state implied violence and the stage beyond which recycling would completely obliterate the shape of the body.

Everything in this episode – the lifting of the lid, the color of the liquid, the pulling out of a boiled and flayed body – was concerned with demonstrating the crucial stage in the recycling of the commodified and fragmented human body: the retrieval of fat from soma. Almost indiscernibly, Nałkowska changed the status of what was collected and unseen to that which was displayed, to the spectacle of reification. Through the realization of the lab's true function, the space transmogrified from the forensic lab into a soap-manufacturing place. Therefore, her reportage was conceived as a carefully dosed distribution of knowledge, or rather of both the initial lack and the gradual acquisition of knowledge by the reader. Only the visitors investigating the basement understood the unfolding logic of the whole cycle – which is to say, while they knew – the dead participated unknowingly and passively in the spectacle of showing and recycling their own cadavers.

²⁴ The question of the quantity of fat was addressed during the interrogation as a matter of fact: „One man maybe five kilos of fat.” (8).

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For the dead, the gesture of exhibiting and, thus, “museuming” their cadavers took place without their knowledge. As they lay extended, they resembled the dead Psyche from Freud’s last written note.²⁵ Like her, they were unaware of the ongoing panoptic spectacle. Having been shown, they were subsequently subjected to an aestheticizing strategy, in which Nałkowska elevated the status of the immobile body to that of a work of art, to a stone sculpture,²⁶ only to overshadow this visual impression by the images of a drastically chopped up and deformed human soma. One such heap of shaved heads lying chaotically, one on top of another – “like potatoes poured onto the ground” (4)—made the spectacle grotesque and almost unreal, despite the comparison taken from the vocabulary of a naturalist.

Nałkowska’s polarized representation of the human *soma* (portrayed either as sculpted stones or potatoes) might appear unwarranted to a critic seeking consistency in her narrative. This conflicting construction subjected the fragmented *soma* to two contradictory systems: that of modernist aestheticism and naturalist authenticity. In fact, this apparent confusion stemmed from the author’s previously unresolved and intrinsically incoherent philosophy.²⁷ However, from my critical perspective, which does not privilege consistency in art, the rupture caused by her reliance on two different sets of imageries represented to represent her scene most effectively, affected the representational dimension, and thus contributed to a greater dramatic tension within the narrative.

The uneven, oscillating pull of contradictory values and perspectives is best documented in the imagery of collective and individual deaths. For the writer, this must have been a formidable challenge, as she strove to find an adequate strategy to represent the morbid spectacle of recycling human *soma*. Demands of communicating the mass death called for the representation of a total distortion of unique bodily forms. Therefore, Nałkowska suspended the spectacle of erasing individual bodily forms, of turning them into anonymous piles of meat and cauldrons of fat, to expose to the readers’ voyeuristic gaze two, complementing each other, bodily fragments that were still legible and were represented by the writer as inscription subjected to her own way of decoding. One of them is the able-bodied and tattooed torso of a sailor, reduced to being *res extensa*:

In one sarcophagus, the so-called headless “sailor” lay prostrate on a heap of cadavers. He was an impressive youth, as big as a gladiator. The silhouette of a ship was tattooed on his broad chest. Across the contour of the masts hung the sign of vain faith: God is with us (4).

Despite its defacement, the headless torso still bore traces of its previous personhood, since one was able to follow the chain of signification that retained its individuality: the

²⁵ “Psyche is extended, knows nothing about it.” Freud wrote this last note of his on August 22, 1938, a year before his death. S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, eds. J. Strachey and A. Freud, trans. J. Strachey et al., 24 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 23:300.

²⁶ *Nota bene*, the sculpture of a human head on the jacket cover for the first Polish edition of *Medallions* refers to this aestheticized fragmentation of the body in her narrative.

²⁷ As Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa diagnosed the writer’s thinking in her monograph (145).

ship indicated the sailor's line of work, the body build spoke of his strength and height, and the tattooed skinscript was a confession of his faith.²⁸ In fact, this skinscript was longer and contained more information than the writer conveyed to the reader, since it indicated that the wretched sailor had served since 1930 as a crewmember on the Polish destroyer, "The Gale" ["Wicher"]. Nałkowska excluded this information from representation and reduced the already sparse data to a shred, only to question the effectiveness of the sailor's religious beliefs. Her verdict denied any agency to the sailor, rendering his faith entirely powerless: he was decapitated, exposed, and denigrated, intended for consumption in the form of soap. In her representation, Christ's *hic est enim corpus meum*, as an article of faith, had no power to redeem the sailor's defaced cadaver. Through this and similar narrative interventions present in her collection, Nałkowska negated any soteriological possibility, a maneuver in sync with her pronounced atheism that also constitutes one of her volume's most complete and coherent aspects.

In yet another glimpse, the writer used her descriptive skills to create a death mask. This time, the image of a singular death reversed the meaning and the form of the sailor's corpse: all that remained of the body was the head severed from the torso. In this seemingly coincidental manner, both corpses created an uncanny wholeness.

In the corner of one vat lay the small, cream-colored head of a boy who couldn't have been more than eighteen years old when he died. His dark, somewhat slanted eyes were not closed, the eyelids were only slightly lowered. The full mouth, of the same color as the face, bore a patient, sad smile. The strong, straight brow was raised as though in disbelief. In this most odd and inconceivable position, he awaited the world's final verdict (4).

Again, Nałkowska excised the bodily shred from any theology of embodiment. Instead, the youth's decapitated head recalled the Cartesian dualism as a philosophical trope. It signified the location of the thought-producing brain, the thinking substance, the *res cogitans*. In approaching this death mask, Nałkowska focused on seeking a lasting meaning in the subtly detailed facial expression frozen by the *rigor mortis*. In this instance, her mimetic precision demanded an unusual degree of insight, a means of getting, literally, under the skin – even at the risk of destabilizing her usual policy of non-intrusion.

Although throughout *Medallions* the authorial position is defined through this non-intrusive approach to the lives and narratives of Holocaust victims, in these two brief glimpses at individualized death, Nałkowska deemed authorial intervention necessary perhaps because, first of all, these shreds of the human form could not speak for

²⁸ The skinscript was in Polish, which added more weight to the argument against connecting this phrase with the "Got mit uns" calling of the two world wars; furthermore, its iconography, as recorded by Nałkowska, differs from its much better-known German counterpart. The phrase inserted on belt buckles of German imperial army soldiers was intended as part of an iconographic and ideological design, which included a laurel wreath and, as its most prominent sign, the imperial crown. The Wehrmacht soldiers' belt buckle consisted of yet a more complicated design: the very same religious expression, the *Hakenkreuz*, a laurel leaf wreath and an eagle. Nonetheless, in each case, one encounters an old tradition of invoking God's help.

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themselves, but also because of their particularly disturbing nature. The writer's usual gesture of self-decentering²⁹ would have proven ineffective in conveying her horrifying encounter with the dismembered youth. Therefore, she created space for a rather discrete evaluation in an otherwise factual description of the victim's age, smile, and raised eyebrows – as though to prevent herself from mimicking the mere mechanical listing of the “parts among parts.”

Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa remarked that after Nałkowska's authorial debut, the adjective “dziwny” (odd, strange) belonged to Nałkowska's entrenched lexical repertoire (36). She criticized what she viewed as the writer's predilection for the adjective, maintaining that, in using it, Nałkowska tended to blur everything.³⁰ The word, particularly popular in the Young Poland, can easily obfuscate the meaning of its context and, indeed, even sound naïve. In the case of Nałkowska's Holocaust narration, though, we deal with a different, quite subtle and relevant meaning of “most odd, perplexing” as a qualifier for her encounter with the dead youth. Balancing a difficult act between the tender and dispassionate, Nałkowska conveyed the individual death in terms of an extreme experience with which she empathized *against all odds* and, especially, against an overwhelming sense of loss and dehumanization.

This impossible gesture came with a price: the crisis of *Einfühlung* was enhanced by a universal awareness that another's experience of dying cannot be reconstructed. The boy's death mask suggested the lengths to which one could, or rather could not, go in an attempt to read someone else's passage to death. There is no easy way out of this cognitive conundrum, although the necessity of differentiating the movement towards death from death's finality is critical to the entire Holocaust experience, as it transcended the limits of universal accessibility.

Nałkowska ended her attempt at invoking individual death with a nod toward the inaccessible. Was it the brutality of his execution at such young age or that the victim himself could not conceive? Since it would be preposterous to use a prosopopeic voice and speak in his name, the unreachable and, thus, unspeakable was negotiated through the spectator's contradictory rhetoric of oddity and *Einfühlung*. The writer's reading the skinscripts on the sailor's headless body along with the mortuary traces left on the youth's facial features pointed to an insurmountable distinction between the living spectators and the dead subjugated to ongoing scopis inquiry. It also pointed to the living spectator who participated in this process and inscribed on it the verdict of disbelief as an ethical response. This had to do with the dynamics of (un)knowing throughout the narrative, in which the living had access to different aspects of both knowledge and its lack, while the dead represented the unknowing. The final stage of recycling the corpses into soap constituted their knowing (and the victims' unknowing) and reflected the entire trajectory from the single body to cosmetic.

²⁹ In “Professor Spanner,” the writer uses the plural we to refer to the committee members and their usher, which stood in polar opposition to the truncated cadavers referred to as these.

³⁰ However, the critic did not speak of Nałkowska's *Medallions*.

In her wartime diary, Nałkowska pondered the eerie and repetitious nature of the war experience, its uncanny resemblance to other wars and how it all always-already was. Her contemplation of the war pointed to the repetitious nature of its universal cruelty, as well as its mimetic representation. If we follow the author's premise that "wszystko to już było," paradoxically, several new cognitive possibilities are open for interpretation, shifting the narrative from the historical referent to the author's artistic construal. Besides and beyond the accuracy of the parallel with the slaughterhouse, Nałkowska's narrative also engaged other contextual, religious, literary and pictorial traditions. By retreating to her old vocabulary (and interpretative habit), which connoted a feeling of strangeness, oddity, and disbelief, Nałkowska enabled an evaluative mechanism, which referred as far back as Ezekiel's vision of the bodies of deportees from Jerusalem in a foreign city, described rather bluntly by the prophet as "the meat in the pot" (Ezekiel 11:1-13). While the prophet's better-known intimations of his people's rebirth and redemption were hardly relevant to Nałkowska's non-soteriological conception, his rhetoric combined with the pictorial concreteness characteristic of his first vision, preempts not just the accumulation of fragmented corpses in Spanner's lab, but, to a certain extent, the twentieth-century artistic practices of fragmenting and, most notably, dissolving the body.

Furthermore, under the writer's pen, the modernist order of the slaughterhouse is intertwined with another form of imagery – the Shakespearean horror understood as violation of ethics, a sphere of the evil subjected to a taboo; hence associating such activity with witchcraft. The eerie witches, Macbeth's helpers, brew a potion out of morsels of animal bodies mixed with pieces of human corpses: "a liver of a blaspheming Jew,"/ "Nose of Turk; and Tartar's lips/ Finger of birth-strangl'd babe."³¹ This concoction of anatomical fragments was based on a simple recipe: it consisted of everything that, in Shakespeare's time, represented the Other and, as such, became a candidate for sacrifice.

Unlike the witches, who were not task-oriented, Spanner had a clearly defined utilitarian goal that prevailed over his anti-Semitism: to provide soap for Germany. Indeed, during the earlier stages of his operation, the corpses Spanner processed were Jewish, mainly from the Stutthof concentration camp. However, toward the end of the war, he used, in the mode of the Shakespearean witches, racially and ethnically diverse corpses in his experiments. Nałkowska's reportage uncovered the use of ethnically diverse bodies in Spanner's lab, since the vats contained a diversified human *soma*, diverse in terms of the victims' national and racial origin: the bodies of Soviet prisoners of war, of Jews from East Prussia and Pomerania, of patients from the psychiatric institute in Conradstein, as well as corpses of executed German officers, possibly victims of the escalating purge of the anti-Hitlerite opposition, sent from both the Danzig and Königsberg state prisons. Since the bodies were sent from the entire Pomerania region, one can safely surmise that there were more Polish cadavers some of the bodies than the corpse of the able-bodied sailor.

³¹ W. Shakespeare, "Macbeth," *The Complete Works* (New York: Avenel Books, 1975), 1060.

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This defies the popular perception that the soap was made of “pure Jewish fat.” Since, during the war, the abbreviation “R.I.F.” (with no final period) was inscribed on bars of soap, although Spanner’s bars of soap had no such sign, these letters were mistranslated and misspelled as *Rein Idische Seif* (pure Jewish soap), when, in reality, the abbreviation stood for *Reichsstelle für Industrielle Fettversorgung* (State Center for Supply of Fats). Therefore, we may consider this misperception a curious symptom of a “purist” and essentialist reading, or, at least, note that the tension between essentialism and utilitarianism reaches its peak in this misreading.

The Smell of Truth and Two Digressions

“Don’t economize on soap!”

(Sign on the wall of the washroom in Auschwitz)
Primo Levi

Both the medical and the chemical processes taking place secretly in the Danzig forensic lab were based on the initial premise that the body could be completely transformed into a new and useful product. If the body, in the Nazi project, was to be transformed totally (into soap), it was presumed that its new utilitarian ontology would retain no vestiges or traces of its previous status – which is to say, nothing human. For Spanner, fulfilling the objective of such recycling meant eliminating the last remaining human trace: the soap’s stubbornly persistent, peculiar odor. The interrogated lab worker confessed that this product “didn’t smell very good. Professor Spanner tried hard to get rid of the smell. He wrote away to chemical factories for oils. But *you could always tell the soap was different*” (emphasis added, 9). Since the doctor could not erase the trace of the constituent bodies from the disgusting soap, his research thus emphasized the tension inherent in soap between its sanitary use and abjection. The appearance of the odor as a byproduct of the fat recycling revealed the limits of scientific progress and, subsequently, of the transformational method that he used: even in its radically altered form, the soap continued in its abjection, exuding, in one of the unwilling consumers’ own words, an “unpleasant” human odor.

In the lab’s utilitarian microcosm, where “everything was permitted,” reaching a solution to the unappealing smell was only a matter of time. Yet the divide between the utilitarian approach to the body and the principle of absolute permissiveness did not necessarily inform a clash between them. In fact, as Hannah Arendt pointed out in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the claim of absolute permissiveness was already a part of nineteenth-century utilitarian understanding of common sense (440). If we follow her analysis of permissive utilitarianism as present within totalitarianism, one thing becomes quite clear. The enclosed realm of a concentration camp and a zone such as the one under Spanner’s control share one characteristic: the totalitarian power that allowed the cruelest, craziest, and “most odd” (many of them non-utilitarian) concepts to have materialized. And it was permissiveness in its totalitarian version

that facilitated Spanner's inventiveness,³² which for one of his lab workers spoke of the arcane knowledge of "how to make something—from nothing" (9).

The usage of soap was cleverly manipulated in Auschwitz in order to dispel a fear of death in the newly arrived prisoners. Primo Levi mentions that the signs encouraging a liberal use of soap were undermined by the poor quality of the product distributed to prisoners.³³ In the larger context of the genocide, an excursion into cosmetic supplies in wartime France seems a bit out of place, but, after all, that war was prompted, among others, by a grandiose project of social hygiene. The greatly simplified bodily hygiene and a corresponding shortage of cosmetic supplies was, so to speak, a collateral damage incited by the war economy. Soap, usually taken for granted, became scarce even in France during the war. The provincial town of Roanne in central France and, later, the village of Coligny, north of Lyon, served as the wartime refuge of the French poet Francis Ponge and his family, who experienced war through "restrictions of all kinds, and soap, real soap, was particularly missed."³⁴ His complaint pertained to the same inferior quality of soap as that mentioned by Levi: "We had only the worst ersätze – which did not froth at all" (Ponge 11). The inferior quality of soap, predicated on widespread shortages, motivated the poet to focus his post-phenomenological gaze on other aspects of the cosmetic. He observed its hard substance: "a sort of stone" (14), "Magic stone!" (21), "Slobbering stone..." (28). In short, Ponge invented soap anew and construed its naturalness as stone.

Even during the post-war years, by which time conditions had improved, Ponge perceived soap as an elusive product. Whenever he tried to touch its pebble-like form, the soap would foam and slide easily from his hands. Gazing thus at its absence, he reflected on its slippery and almost deceitful, yet tangible, concreteness. For him too, soap's teleology was to disappear – either in water or in the war.³⁵ Like a stone, Ponge's soap has weight, but its flowery aroma was beyond his olfactory expectations, for "it was

³² For example, there were 350 corpses in the morgue, in contrast to the anatomy institute's standard requirement of approximately 14, the number necessary to teach local medical students the craft of dissection. The abundance of corpses forced Spanner, anticipating their usefulness, to store some of them should there be future shortages or an expansion of his manufacture. This excess illustrates well the permissive aspect of totalitarianism.

³³ Levi writes: "The prisoners were required to take a shower two or three times a week. However, these ablutions were not sufficient to keep them clean as soap was handed out in very parsimonious quantities: only a single 50-gram bar per month. Its quality was extremely poor; it consisted of a rectangular block, very hard, devoid of any fatty material but instead full of sand. It did not produce lather and disintegrated very easily, so after a couple of showers it was completely used up." P. Levi with L. de Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, trans. J. Woolf, ed. R. S.C. Gordon (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 45.

³⁴ F. Ponge, *Soap*, trans. L. Dunlop (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1969), 11.

³⁵ Ponge's *Savon* serves as a case in point for Peter Schwenger who persuasively relates the concept of the thing and its poetic erasure to the death drive. P. Schwenger, "Words and the Murder of the Thing," in *Things*, ed. B. Brown, ed., *Critical Inquiry*, no. 1 (2001): 99-113.

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a little more strongly scented” (63).³⁶ I do not suggest that he became a bit indifferent to the odor of history; rather, in all probability, the stench of decomposing corpses – *that* horrible stench mentioned by Borowski, Janet Flanner, and W.G. Sebald among others – never reached Roanne and Coligny. Pleasant or not, for Ponge, the smell transcended the questions of matter and its markers to enter the domain of olfactometry and subjective responses to odors.

Arguably, no modernist inquiry into the sense of smell can match Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume*, which made a compelling equation between the soul and the individual’s essence as constituted in a bodily smell.³⁷ Thus this odor, if captured and retained (as his protagonist-perfumist desired to do), would preserve the core of an individual soul. But the perfumer had to kill a virgin in order to extract a unique essence. Was the German writer speculating about the (im)permanence of the soul and matter in the manner that I struggled to dispel on these pages? Hardly. Rather, he focused on the social repercussions of the perfect perfume in the manner that allowed an allegorization of the political. In “Professor Spanner,” on the other hand, the persisting odor of the soap suggested that between the intimate and somatic traverses something that can be qualified as an irreducible phenomenon, indivisible and invisible, the most intimate and little known bond between the physiological and the spiritual.

While Süskind’s “alchemist” set for himself the goal of both discovery and preservation, perhaps even respect, for the individual bodily essence, Spanner intended to obliterate the bodily core entirely from his final product. The symbolic concept of (un)recyclability did not exist in his mortuary science prior to recycling. Spanner’s *savon* did not yield itself to pleasant consumption, for it remained abject from beginning to end and, thus, he furtively searched for an effective recipe to dispel human vestige – in the ethereal form of smell – in order to manufacture the better quality soap worthy of every German bathroom.

This odor – the invisible remainder/reminder of the soap’s true origin – signaled a particular glitch in Nazi recycling. The trace of the human agent, if you will, worked against the total reduction of the reified body into nothing. Thus the human agent destabilized, albeit temporarily, the unvoiced ideological assumption concerning the utilitarian and biopolitical status of the human subject as easily recyclable. The undesirable smell of the extract spoke of the spectral Derridian trace, of the illusive core that continued to remind its consumers of their own bio-ontology. Only a complete obfuscation of the human agent could make the process successful. Instead, the somatic object of scientific desire, which was sought only that it might be destroyed and never again desired, resisted the transformation. It became a spectral remainder/reminder of a seemingly neutralized truth, its working parallel to that of memory. Of all the types of Holocaust recycling, this one failed.

³⁶ The reader should not be mystified by this arguably frivolous statement since, during WWII, Ponge was also a soldier, an insurance worker and a Resistance organizer.

³⁷ P. Süskind, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, trans. J. E. Woods (New York: Pocket Books, 1991).