

irrelevant the self and the actions we have created while alive.

While such questions may suggest that any impression we can leave is transitory, a proper Jungian would likely believe otherwise. Brokenness and disconnection are merely parts of the life process: “Like every person, Misia was born broken into pieces, incomplete, in bits. Everything in her was separate—looking, hearing, understanding, feeling, sensing, and experiencing. Misia’s entire future life would depend on putting it all together into a single whole, and then letting it fall apart” (42). A life’s work then consists of the building of an identity, making an indelible mark on the world. Even if that whole identity breaks apart—in death, for example—those pieces will later be picked up by someone else.

It is also important to note the attention paid to sensory information here and throughout the novel. A short while later, for example, Misia’s father gives her a coffee grinder that is described in detail from its manufacture through its passage into Misia’s hands, “absorb[ing] all the world’s confusion” along the way (44). Ultimately “the grinder, Misia and the whole world were united by the odor of freshly ground coffee” (45). The sensory, a means of taking in the world personally and physically, thus becomes one possible method for sharing experience.

Tokarczuk explores shared experience in emotional and literal terms. In the course of the novel grass bleeds, a woman experiences touch vicariously, a house has a soul, clothes have memory, mushrooms are described as possessing time, and animals dream in images. One could certainly argue that these constructs are merely figurative personifications or the conventions of magical realism, but Tokarczuk’s insistence on connecting the experiences of flora, fauna, and even inanimate objects to the human experience, never privileging one over the other, indicates a desire to unify all experience in a way vital to the novel’s themes. These constructs are inherently empathetic. Tokarczuk ultimately argues that sharing experience among all worldly things is a prerequisite for living. In fact, if we cannot know the nature of God or if he is an illusion or may have taken leave from us, we are left with our attachments, physical and emotional, to this world. *Primeval* shows us that in the past century’s turbulence experience itself may be the only means left for us to share with others, and the only trace we leave in the world. ♦

A Postcard From The Volcano

By Lucy Beckett. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press (Ignatius.com), 2009. 520 pages. ISBN 978-15861-72695. Paper. \$16.95 (plus postage) from the publisher.

Raymond Gawronski, SJ

Ancient Poland, like Ireland, had five main geographical divisions. The westernmost, Pomerania and Silesia, were subject to a centuries-long cultural penetration by the German Empire to the West such that by the High Middle Ages, the two provinces were well on their way to becoming the German provinces they eventually were. Silesia, with its capital of Breslau (Wrocław) was especially rich culturally and materially. It is perhaps best known for its spiritual children Angelus Silesius, Eichendorff, and St. Edith Stein. With its ancient Slavic place names and bishopric of Vratislava, with a residual Slavic presence in its villages—gradually increasing toward the east until Upper Silesia itself opted to join prewar Poland—Silesia was variously Polish and Czech, Austrian, Prussian, German, and, after the Second World War, Polish again. Vast shifts of population followed the war here as in the rest of East Central Europe, such that today Silesia is a Polish province with its capital Wrocław.

The hatred of the [Catholic] Poles that this book betrays is astounding, and it feeds the monumental Polonophobia that is woven into the social and cultural fabric of American society. . . . It is a mystery why the premier Catholic press in America should publish a book that. . . is venomous and manifestly unfair in its treatment of the one nation in Europe that. . . produced more martyrs than any other for saving Jewish people during the Second World War, and that itself walked through a Via Dolorosa, producing more saints—and sainted priests—than any of its richer neighbors.

English scholar Lucy Beckett selects Silesia as the stage for her very interesting if seriously flawed novel, *A Postcard from the Volcano*. The novel begins in 1914 and continues to just before the Second World War. The story follows the life of a young Prussian count, Max von Hofmannswaldau, from an ancient Silesian family. Very soon in the story we learn that Max’s mother’s family, Protestants for several generations—

his grandfather a famous physician—are in fact converted Jews. This sets the stage for the central question of the novel: how did it happen that Germany, with its tremendous civilization, should turn against its Jews who were very assimilated? This is the central meditation, for as Dr. Beckett points out the Jews had long idolized everything German and aspired to be full members of that society, and yet it was precisely that society that turned against them.

The novel shows a good understanding of German Silesian culture as well as European culture in general, and of the views of the various ethnic groups concerning each other. Toward the middle of reading the book, however, I began to become increasingly disquieted, and only resolved to finish reading the book because the area is of great interest to me. I began to see this as a very tendentious piece of literary propaganda, written by a strongly prejudiced woman for her grandchildren “Isabel and Harry Rosenbaum.” Virtually every portrayal of Jews is extremely sympathetic. Although there is in fact a promiscuous secular Jewish daughter of an abortionist physician father—a concession to the image of Jews in Christian society—time and again, Jews are brilliant, especially gifted, sympathetic people up against a brute Gentile society. Any notion that Jewish involvement in communist movements had profoundly threatened and in fact betrayed their Gentile neighbors is simply pooh-poohed by Beckett, dismissed out of hand (270–71, 418, 421). Instead, according to Beckett, Jews everywhere are disliked because their less gifted neighbors are too lazy or stupid to compete with them and so resent them (60–61, 170).

Particularly prejudiced is Dr. Beckett’s portrayal of Poles. In this, she is simply outrageously bigoted. There are, to be sure, lovable and pious Polish Catholic nannies and peasants who serve on the Silesian estate. Max’s best friend, Adam Zapolski, is the son of a deceased Polish Galician war hero and a Viennese German mother. Subtly implying that Poles tended to collaborate with Nazis—a manifest absurdity given Nazi practice—the widow Zapolski takes to sporting a diamond studded swastika. What German woman who would wear a swastika would have married a Pole, count or not? Or vice versa? It is absurd.

There is the Polish maid of loose morals, incongruously named Katya (a bit like a British servant named Helmut). There is a small army of drunks and hobos, all of whom are Poles (347, 407). And, of course, we are told, time and again, that “the Poles hate the Jews.” There is a certain intelligence in how Beckett

states this, because she insists that the Poles “hate the Jews” because they are Catholics, whereas the Germans have taken a new tack, a racial tack.

Yet it is this assertion, stated time and again in the book, that is particularly obnoxious (57, 84, 124, 240, 271, 272, 274, 276, 277, 390, 441). Behind it is the effort to discredit the Poles as a Catholic nation. In the beginning of the book we are told that Count Max, who eventually becomes a Catholic, is buried by a “good Irish priest” (this will certainly please perhaps many of Ignatius’s readers and editors). When Adam Zapolski, now an ordained priest at Kraków’s Wawel Cathedral (shades of Wojtyła) returns to his family estate with the visiting Count Max, it is to visit a Jewish village. There we learn that Jewish villages are more sober and prone to educating their children than the Polish villages that (of course) are full of illiterate drunks (82–83, 456).

Ms. Beckett hardly misses a chance to take a shot at the Poles. She greatly admires the Czechs over the Poles as having worked economic wonders—completely ignoring the vastly different histories and religious commitments of the two nations. One wonders if Ignatius Press really prefers an atheist nation to a Catholic nation because the values of the atheist nation are more congenial to contemporary Americans, ostensibly Catholic or not. In the end, the religious hero of the story is a Rhineland Catholic intellectual (*pari passu*, anticipation of Ratzinger). As to Poland, we are left with a nation of illiterate drunken Catholics who hate the Jews, with the occasional gallant nobleman.

I long puzzled over this book. My parents were Polish Catholics who greatly admired Jews and who sent me to a Yeshiva Day Camp one summer. They supported my cousin Teresa who broke with custom—on every side—and married a Jewish man; on the day we celebrated their wedding, *his* family held a funeral service for him. Who hated whom? (cf. 351) The only hatred I have encountered of Jews among people from that part of the world is invariably tied into the role of Jewish people as statistically more likely to collaborate with the Soviet occupiers, and even then most people had some fond memory of particular Jewish people with whom they lived amicably. The hatred of the Poles that this book betrays is astounding, and it feeds the monumental Polonophobia that is woven into the social and cultural fabric of American society.

It is an interesting thing, and quite understandable, that a scholar with strong personal ties to the Jewish people and a strong interest in German civilization should write a book for her grandchildren lionizing the

virtues of her people. It is a mystery why the premier Catholic press in America should publish a book that, among other good things, is venomous and manifestly unfair in its treatment of the one nation in Europe that gave the Jewish people a home for many centuries, that produced more martyrs than any other for saving Jewish people during the Second World War, and that itself walked through a Via Dolorosa, producing more saints—and sainted priests—than any of its richer neighbors who however produced massive doses of insanity and unprecedented genocide.

In effect, the book simply discounts Polish Catholicism in the end as irrelevant to the modern West, and as such discredits the lives and witness of an army of Polish priests, nuns, and dedicated lay people who on every continent are bearing witness to the Catholic faith even as I write. A very interesting study of the oddly symbiotic relation of Germans and Jews, this is also a fairly intelligent example of Polonophobia in which “the Other”, the Pole, is simply created out of whole cloth, given Russian names, portrayed as a caricature. Dr. Beckett is capable of considerable subtlety in some areas, but in others she is brutally unfair. How unfortunate, since this is an interesting book but one in which ideology trumps the complexity and subtlety of truth. In this story Dr. Beckett has created a myth for her grandchildren in which they can be proud, but she has created it at the expense of other peoples’ grandchildren who are once again stigmatized by great untruths. It is a shame that Dr. Beckett and Ignatius Press have furthered a “big lie” mixed in, as is sometimes the case, with much perceptive truth. Some careful, intelligent, and knowledgeable editing would have helped make this book a tool for mutual understanding. As it stands, it is largely the same old treatment of Polish Catholics, myths created by comfortable and ignorant people thousands of miles away. ◇

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Paweł Styrna

This issue opens with Barbara Polak’s interview with historians Sławomir Kalbarczyk and Witold

Wasilewski discussing the 1940 Soviet murder of 25,700 Polish military personnel. While historians know more about Katyń now than twenty years ago, Kalbarczyk rightly observes that “it is difficult to ascertain whether the current state of our knowledge is complete and which conclusions can be considered definitive. We will only gain that knowledge when the files of the Russian investigation are finally made accessible. We are only familiar with the contents of some of the files. The sixty-seven files granted us by the Russians have not in the least contributed to the state of our knowledge because the documents are irrelevant.” The historians also express concern over the fact that most publications on the Katyń Forest Massacre appearing in post-Soviet Russia are of a revisionist nature. These range from Yuri Mukhin’s outright denial of Soviet guilt to more nuanced and sophisticated “scholarly” attempts to whitewash and rationalize Bolshevik culpability. These disturbing trends do not bode well for Polish-Russian reconciliation in the near future.

Much like the Nazis who told their Jewish victims that the death trains would merely “deport” them to the “East,” the Soviets ensured that their Polish victims would be oblivious to their fate until the very end.

This is followed by Witold Wasilewski’s article about Western attitudes toward Katyń. These, the historian argues, have been a function of politics. As the Second World War raged, the Western Allies refused to accept Soviet culpability for the crime, and they castigated Poles for allegedly jeopardizing the unity of the anti-Axis alliance. However, Western delegates to the Nuremberg trials defeated the Soviet attempt to pin the blame on the Germans. During the cold war the political climate shifted in favor of exposing the truth about Katyń. In 1951–52 the U.S. House of Representatives launched a Congressional Commission (the Madden Commission) to investigate the communist atrocity. The Western Right generally favored commemorating and publicizing the truth about the massacre. On the other hand, the Left eschewed the subject for fear of straining relations with the communist world and handing political ammunition to the anticommunist Right. Yet in spite of the fact that not every Westerner wished to hear the truth about Katyń, the West nevertheless provided a venue to speak the truth freely.

Another article by Wasilewski analyzes the disinformation techniques employed by the Soviet