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Aleksandra Ziółkowska-Boehm, *Na tropach Wańkowicza po latach* [On the Trail of Wańkowicz, after Many Years] Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2009. Pp. 600. ISBN 978-83-7648-261-3.

Reportage is one of the more interesting genres for an author to work in. On the boundary between journalism and history, it requires of the practitioner the reporter's eye for matters of public interest, and the historian's sense of the gravity of the events he or she is reporting on — which in turn is something between a sixth-sense receptivity to the hidden wheels of history and a gambler's faith in his system as he places down his chips before the roulette wheel spins. It is a genre that, while immersed in historical (and ephemeral) reality, requires a poetic talent for engaging prose: something that will bring the experienced *in flagranti* again to vivid life on the cold pages of the book in the reader's hands. It is no surprise, then, that so great a poet as Zbigniew Herbert took up the reporter's pen in *The Barbarian in the Garden*. However, the greatest of the practitioners of reportage, like Ewon Kisch and Ryszard Kapuściński, didn't just dabble in it — they made their living from it, as did perhaps the greatest of the lot in Poland, the hero of this collection, Melchior Wańkowicz.

*Na tropach Wańkowicza po latach*, from the able pen of Wańkowicz's secretary and propagator of his works, Aleksandra Ziółkowska-Boehm, is the opening volume in a praiseworthy sixteen-part re-issue of Wańkowicz's works by the Prószyński and Co. publishing house in Warsaw. Whether the receptor of the series is himself a Wańkowicz scholar, or just beginning to become acquainted with his works; whether he or she reads it at the beginning of the adventure, after it, or while following the writer on his journeys across two continents, in war, peace (and during the subtle war waged between Polish society and the PRL régime), Ziółkowska's book is an engaging, informative and indeed encyclopedic consideration of Wańkowicz and his writings. It is, in short, a model for how the collected works of a noted author ought to be handled by the series editor to whom they are entrusted, and by the publisher who decides to take on the project. It provides a necessary historical and biographical context for the series of books, which are so full of interest in their own right, that most readers will not stop at the volume they chance across in the bookstore, but will be pulled on to read several more, if not the entire slate. For once, it seems, a publisher (a subspecies of our kind most often motivated by financial concerns), gets it right.

*Na tropach Wańkowicza po latach* is a collection of thirty essays written by Ziółkowska-Boehm, a practitioner of reportage herself, whose interests range from Polish literature and history to the plight of Native Americans. An intimate literary collaborator of Wańkowicz, her splendid obsession with his published works makes her not the perfect, but really the only person who could contextualize the gigantic career of the writer in an accessible, yet meticulously documented, fashion.

The thirty essays — some previously published, in *The Polish Review* and elsewhere — are arranged in loose chronological order. They range from the pre-war account of Wańkowicz's role in the creation of Rój publishers ("Roy," during its wartime hiatus in New York), which published, among others, the poems of Kazimierz Wierzyński, and the first edition of Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdynand*, through a moving account of Wańkowicz's 1974 funeral. While all of the essays are intriguing — and readers of *Monte Cassino* and other of Wańkowicz's works will be quite pleased with those dealing with the genesis and surrounding realia of his famous books — it is those which reveal the *man* Wańkowicz, who

he was, and especially who he was in regard to the Communist authorities who at times tolerated, and at other times persecuted him, that are most noteworthy and valuable.

Ziółkowska constructs her complex and many-sided portrait of Wańkowicz from four main sources. First, there are the eyewitness accounts, such as her description of the funeral — how different a picture one gets from the relation of a person who was actually there, than from the relation of the official, Party reporters covering the event:

Od bramy trumnę nieśli między innymi Krzysztof Kąkolewski i Jan Józef Lipski. Na czele konduktu pogrzebowego siedł biskup Kraszewski, księża, ojciec dominikanin reprezentujący kościół parafialny przy Dominikańskiej. Telewizja, która filmowała uroczystości pogrzebowe, starannie omijała udział w nim księży [...] Nim zasypiano grób, odezwał się nowy głos. Stojący tuż nad mogiłą mężczyzna odczytał z kartki parę zdań. Mówił, że wszyscy będą pamiętać Katyń i obchodzić jego rocznice. Potem dowiedziałyśmy się z Martą [Erdman, córką Wańkowicza], że to był Wojciech Ziemiński, późniejszy członek KOR-u (389).

[From the gate, the casket was borne by, among others, Krzysztof Kąkolewski and Jan Józef Lipski. At the head of the funeral procession walked Bishop Kraszewski, priests, and a Dominican father representing the parish church on Ul. Dominikanska. /State/ television which transmitted the funeral, took great pains to avoid showing the priests/.../ Before the grave was covered, a new voice was heard. A man, standing near grave, read a few sentences written down on a sheet of paper. He said that we would all remember Katyń and observe its anniversary. Later on, Marta [Erdman, Wańkowicz's daughter] and I learned that this man was Wojciech Ziemiński, who later was to be a member of KOR].

But these are not simply the memoirs of a person who knew the protagonist (as are, for example, the *Discretions* of Mary de Rachewiltz, Ezra Pound's daughter). Ziółkowska draws expertly and generously from the published works of others, building a model corpus of secondary sources that help in the fleshing out of the character of Wańkowicz from perspectives other than her own. In her description of the manner in which the PRL régime sought to hijack the funeral of the writer so often at odds with them, she cites Aleksander Małachowski's introduction to the 1993 PWN edition of Wańkowicz's *Ziela na kraterze* [*Herbs around the Crater*]:

Marcie Erdman, córce Pana Melchiora, zaoferowano wspaniały pogrzeb na koszt państwa, gdy tylko przyleciała z USA. Musiałem się sprzeciwić, gdyż kilka dni wcześniej Pan Melchior przetrzymywał mnie i moją żonę do trzeciej nad ranem i wymógł na nas przyrzeczenie, iż nie dopuścimy do oficjalnego, rządowego pogrzebu, bo „oni zechcą się sfotografować nad moją trumną [...] Pogrzeb Pana Melchiora, zgodnie z jego wolą, był kościelny na koszt rodziny (391).

[A soon as she got off the plane from the U.S., Marta Erdman, Melchior's daughter, was offered a splendid funeral for her father, paid for by the state. I had to object to this, as just a few days earlier, Melchior kept me and my wife by his side until three o'clock in the morning, and made us swear that we would not allow the state to organize an official, government-sponsored funeral, for "they'd certainly like to be photographed over my coffin"/.../ Melchior's funeral, according to his will, was a religious affair, the costs of which were borne by his family].

Thirdly, there are, of course, citations from Wańkowicz's own writings. Although *Na tropach Wańkowicza po latach* is not a biography, in essays such as „Na końcu języka” [“On the Tip of the Tongue”] glimpses of Wańkowicz the man, before he became Wańkowicz the writer,

abound. There we meet him, in his reminiscences, as a child in the eastern marches of Poland, long lost to her eastern neighbor; there we are treated to Wańkowicz's own prose, such as this vignette from *Karafka La Fontaine'a* [*La Fontaine's Carafe*]:

Myślę, że język to jak potężny prąd; wpada weń gnijąca gałąź, zwiędłe liście, gnój, błoto z kąpiących się krów, pot pławionych koni, zawartość spływających kloak — spójrzmy w dół o kilka kilometrów, już się to wszystko wyożonowało, już nurt przejrzysty. Język to potęga samooczyszczania się (336).

[I think that a language is like a powerful stream. A rotting tree limb, withered leaves, manure, mud from cows bathing upstream, the sweat of horses through a ford, the effluvia of emptied *cloaca*, all fall into it — but just gaze it a few kilometers downstream: it is completely clear, it sparkles like crystal. A language has a great power of self-cleansing].

What is this but something that falls just barely short of a Baudelairean prose poem? Ziolkowska's talent for centering the reader's focus on such examples of Wańkowicz's writings brilliantly showcases her critical sense for using them, not merely as illustrations of a biographical thesis, but as an thrilling advertisement for Wańkowicz's books — the *raison d'être* of the Prószyński series — encouraging the reader of her book to pass beyond it, into the writer's works.

As we noted before, Ziolkowska-Boehm is herself an accomplished writer of reportages. The fourth of her sources — sometimes the most insightful — are those that arise from her reporter's legwork. Much of the information upon which the chapters dealing with Wańkowicz's arrest and political trials comes from her accessing newly available state documents from the IPN archives, and interviews with some of the participants of his persecution (which began with his signing of the Writers' Union open letter of protest in 1964). Fascinating, both for its content and the effective reportorial strategy it portrays, is her 1990 interview with the prosecutor who conducted the Wańkowicz case on behalf of the régime. On p. 246, in reply to her question "What did your contacts with Wańkowicz look like during the interrogation," he replies ingenuously:

—Nie wiem, czy Pani ma to w archiwum, ale pan Wańkowicz na końcu sprawy powiedział mi komplement: „Panie prokuratorze — powiedział — ja tej Polski Ludowej nie lubię, ale jako Polak powiem panu, że cieszę się, że Polska dochowała się takich urzędników jak pan”.

Rozmawialiśmy zawsze w dobrej atmosferze, on rozumiał, że muszę wykonywać swoje obowiązki, a ja traktowałem go z dodatkową atencją, nie jak przestępcę... Tyle przecież zrobił dla literatury... Sam odebrałem wykształcenie humanistyczne, literatura zawsze mnie interesowała.

[„I don't know if this is found in your archives, but, at the end of the case, Mr. Wańkowicz paid me a compliment. 'Attorney,' he said 'I don't like thus People's Poland, but as a Pole I'll tell you that I'm happy that Poland had fostered such officials as yourself.'

“The atmosphere of our conversation was always good; he understood that I had to carry out my duties, and I treated his with extra attention, not like a criminal... After all, his services to literature were so great... I myself had a humanistic, liberal education, and literature always interested me.”]

This from a person who, at the beginning of the interview, but one page previously, protested *Nie byłem krytykiem literackim, ale zdawałem sobie sprawę z rangi pisarstwa Wańkowicza i z jego pozycji jako literata, zdawałem sobie więc sprawę, że proces wzbudzi wielkie zainteresowanie, które może się odwrócić przeciwko krajowi*. [‘I’m no literary critic, but I was

aware of the caliber of Wańkowicz's writing and his position as a writer. And so I realized that this case would arouse much interest, which could turn against the country"].

From this it seems apparent that the prosecutor entered the interview with a certain mistrust; he starts flinging about asterisks and reveals his motivation as that of a representative of the system currently ruling "the country," who, in effect, *did* approach Wańkowicz as a threat, in short, a "criminal," albeit only in a political sense. Then, when set at ease by his interlocutor that this interview will not be an "interrogation" itself, he loosens his tie and begins revealing his "humanistic education," his "interest in literature" and starts shining the apple for the artist, whose services to letters he is now able to critically appraise and applaud. Ziółkowska's handling of the interview is a masterful, classroom example of the work of a skilled reporter, who subtly unmask her source and warns the reader, trust him (and other old, official sources) at your own risk.

Doublethink and Newspeak, as Orwell explains to us, are art forms in their own right. The métier of the author of reportages — and in this, the genre may indeed be as old as Herodotus — also partakes of the artistic, insofar as the real information presented us by the reporter is "packaged" in the attractive, poetic style described above. Sometimes, it is not so much the sources, as the reporter, that we must approach with careful tread. The subjective often gets the upper-hand in reportage — witness Herbert's spiteful and simplistic characterization of Ezra Pound, met by chance on his Italian travels in *Barbarian* and formed from hearsay and published information from only one perspective, and dealing with only one aspect of the great poet's life. Witness too Melchior Wańkowicz himself, who suggests to the Polish readers of *W pępku Ameryki* [*In the Navel of America*] that the state of Utah is ruled according to the theocratic principles of the Church of Latter Day Saints, or, in *Atlantyko-Pacyfik* that the "American police" possesses a full set of the fingerprints of just about every citizen of the Republic in which, as a matter of fact, the individual's right to privacy is so jealously guarded, that the Federal government can't even dream of introducing a system of national ID cards, even in this age of the global war on terror. I mention this, not in disparagement of Wańkowicz, whose writings I myself value greatly, but in support and praise of the many-faceted reportage which is Aleksandra Ziółkowska-Boehm's *Na tropach Wańkowicza po latach*. Meticulously researched, innovative and challenging, as well as written in a pleasant style, it is a trustworthy, really indispensable, guide to the great writer, and his writings. In her objective scholarly base of sources, and in her unique subjective perspective on the writer she knew and admired, like her publisher, Ziółkowska *gets it right*.