

LITERARY JOURNALISM IN POLAND

The difficult legacy of Ryszard Kapuscinski's books.

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Whenever Polish literary journalism is considered, the name of Ryszard Kapuscinski takes the first and the last place alike. Despite the fact that more and more contemporary Polish nonfiction works are appearing in English, his works are still the only reportage-related texts that most foreign scholars to study. Interestingly, the situation is not too different in Poland also.



AROUND THE WORLD

Kapuscinski has become an icon of Polish literary journalism, and almost every Polish nonfiction

writer admits being influenced by his methods and books.

Beyond the above declarative statements, however, there is a great tradition of creative nonfiction in Poland, starting somewhere around the late nineteenth century in the fictional novelty. The first influential prefigurations of the literary reportage appeared on the margins of positivist novels of writers like Henryk Sienkiewicz, Wladyslaw Reymont or Stefan Zeromski who could undoubtedly be compared with novelists such as Victor Hugo, Stendhal or Émile Zola. A political, journalistic, or social activity allowed many of them both to deepen their impact on the non-artistic cultural areas and sharpen their sensitivity towards the non-artistic narrative techniques. This consequently must have resulted in the imminent heterogeneity of the Polish literary reportage which paradoxically appeared primarily not as a pure manifestation of the certain genre but as a hybrid of the positivist novel, modernist journalism, literary essay and traditional Polish drawn-out-story (a unique Polish genre usually compared to the Russian *skaz*). This for example has allowed Polish scholars to classify Zeromski's *Inter Arma* published in 1920 as a "poetic reportage" despite the

fact that an ordinary reportage had not appeared in that time yet.

The precursor of Polish literary reportage was Melchior Wankowicz with his book, *In Churches of Mexico* (1927), which was to become the first to explicitly evoke that very term. Proclaimed "the father of the Polish reportage," Wankowicz not only developed this genre but also delineated a complex theory—one that anticipated many later concepts of the American New Journalism. His best known *mosaic theory*, for instance, explains that the preparation of literary reportage resembles the assembling a patchwork of factual components; as a result, a narra-

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tive is like a mosaic, who component stones necessarily reflect their natural tone. Significantly, it is not about referring to ready-made characters in the reality—but rather about creating a subjective figure entwined from a multitude of factual elements which will allow the writer to represent one essential truth instead of a dozen of literal truths. This may explain why Wankowicz insisted on introducing so many fictional characters in his books, trying to integrate people's fortunes into a *pars pro toto* generalization.

Notwithstanding, many journalists accused Wankowicz of *fabulating* (in Robert Scholes's words), fictionalizing and sometimes even lying in his narratives. But nevertheless his genre model has preserved, and it still remains very influential.

Both Modernist and contemporary writers are evidently

inspired by his work, often referencing his theoretical postulate of depicting a complex culture or tackling a social problem in the belletristic fashion. For example, Maciej Wasilewski, in the book entitled *The Queen Arrives Tomorrow* (2013), has used the figure of metonymy for surrogating the actual autochthons of the Pitcairn Island with their schematic silhouettes; it is apparent that his objective was to try to emphasize the social relations that he particularly wanted to focus on—rather than reporting on actual ones.



Apparently the Polish literary reportage is developing within the boundaries marked out by Wankowicz. Even Kapuscinski did not break out of this genre model. Instead, he succeeded in making almost perfect use of it. However, Polish nonfiction writing is gradually gaining dominion over pure fiction; hence, a thorough scrutiny of literary journalism in Poland is clearly becoming a challenging endeavor. Even narratives that cannot be immediately recognized as literary reportage typically referring to the empirical world. So it is something of a dilemma in Polish literary journalism studies that more and more non-fiction books are being considered in terms of fictional literature rather than of factual journalism at all. ♦

