

Andrzej Bobkowski The Other Modernity

Na łuku elektrycznym: o pisaniu Andrzeja Bobkowskiego [On Andrzej Bobkowski's Way of Writing], by Maciej Nowak. Warsaw: Więź, 2015. 520 pages. Illustrations. ISBN 978-83-62610-70-9. Softcover. In Polish.

Maciej Urbanowski

Written with much flair, Maciej Nowak's tome is an exquisite and extensive monograph on one of the most interesting Polish prose writers of the twentieth century. It is also the first book-length study of Andrzej Bobkowski (1913-1961), a surprising fact given that he died more than five decades ago. The surprise will diminish, however, when we realize how difficult it was for his writings to find their way to the reader.

Bobkowski belonged to what is usually called "the 1910 generation." To this group belong Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Kazimierz Wyka, and Witold Gombrowicz. However, unlike his other great contemporaries, Bobkowski made his way into literature relatively late, that is to say after the Second World War. Moreover, his major works were published abroad. Blocked by communist censorship, they reached Polish readership with difficulty.

A better fate befell portions of Bobkowski's wartime journals, travelogues, and essays that appeared in the Polish press after 1945, winning the admiration of literary critics. At that time Bobkowski lived in Paris, where he had arrived in spring 1939 in rather unclear circumstances. Before the war, as a graduate of the Warsaw School of Economics, he became involved in a hitherto-unclear incident that resulted in his decision to leave quickly for Argentina, traveling via France. The outbreak of the war thwarted his plans. When the Third Reich attacked France, the authorities ordered Bobkowski to leave Paris. This was the start of his several-months-long odyssey across France. Bobkowski covered much of the distance on a

bicycle, accompanied by a taxi driver from Warsaw by the name of Tadzio. Years later the writer's records of this exile-cum-excursion were to become the most beautiful part of *Szkice piórkem* [Sketches with the Quill], a masterpiece of Polish diary writing published in Paris in 1957. The book was supposed to be published in Warsaw, but communist censorship intervened. This is hardly surprising: Bobkowski opposed all totalitarianisms, including, of course, communism. He believed in a radical, almost anarchistic individualism. He was a proponent of the individual's right to freedom, and he strongly disliked Russia, a characteristic that could not be looked on favorably by the communists.

In these circumstance Bobkowski chose not to return to Poland after the war. In 1948, concerned as he was with the political and spiritual state of Europe and convinced of its gradual decline into decadence, he left for Guatemala with his wife. Upon arrival, he virtually reinvented his life from scratch. He opened an airplane model-making shop and, through hard work, managed to reach a modicum of financial stability. In the meantime, his works were banned in Poland. He published essays and short stories in the Polish émigré monthly *Kultura* located in Paris. The appearance in the *Kultura* Publishing House of the abovementioned *Sketches with the Quill* [1957] turned out to be a sensation.

Bobkowski's tragedy was that his critically acclaimed journal from Nazi-occupied France was to be his first and last book. In the same year in which he published *Sketches with the Quill*, he was diagnosed with skin cancer. Despite a heroic fight against the illness, Bobkowski died at the age of only forty-eight, with ambitious literary plans in his mind. He did not have time to write the novel of his dreams. He managed to publish a drama and several sketches, of which the 1960 essay *Biografia wielkiego Kosmopolaka* [The Biography of a Great Cosmopole] became well known. The neologism "Cosmopole" has since then been used to refer to the attitude of those Polish citizens who thought about national identity in a non-nationalistic way, in terms of broad cultural wholes. This text was included in the collection

of short stories and sketches titled *Coco de Oro*, published in Paris in 1970.

In Poland Bobkowski's works began to appear in print only in the late 1980s, and even then only in samizdat. However, critics became interested in him, and popularity and recognition gradually increased after 1989. A new edition of *Sketches with the Quill* came out, and a volume of short stories and essays was also published. His fine correspondence was also discovered, including his fascinating letters to *Kultura's* editor Jerzy Giedroyc. Bobkowski became the protagonist of several documentary films and many exhibitions, and the hundredth anniversary of his birth was celebrated with an international conference at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

The author of *Sketches with the Quill* was regarded first and foremost as a nonconformist and a great individualist. Literary critics praised his "Cosmopole" project, discussed his struggles with Romanticism, described him as "a hooligan of freedom" and "France's betrayed lover," and pointed out his parallels with Conrad. Bobkowski's adventurous life raised admiration and curiosity; there is even a bike path named after him in Warsaw. The Left valued him for his antinationalism, the Right for anti-communism.

The temperature of the discussion about Bobkowski's writing was raised significantly several years ago with the publication of an article by Łukasz Mikołajewski, who examined the manuscripts of the wartime journals kept at the Polish Institute of Arts and Science of America in New York City. It turned out that the originals differ considerably from the published version of *Sketches with the Quill*, not only at the level of language or composition, but also in terms of the ideas expressed. For example, the manuscripts reveal Bobkowski's highly critical attitude toward the United States and the political stances of the Jews.

Let me return here to Maciej Nowak's book. It came out at a point when a large part of Bobkowski's works had become widely available, yet attempts at their comprehensive analysis are still lacking. At the same time, some ways of discussing the author of *Sketches with*

the Quill have turned banal, while others are no longer relevant because of what the manuscripts say. Aware of all that, Nowak wrote a book that not only continues and develops the previously established findings, but also goes beyond them. In any case, the author of *On Andrzej Bobkowski's Way of Writing* is less interested in the "political" Bobkowski; he does not offer yet another reconstruction of his protagonist's oft-discussed critique of communism, Hitlerism, Romanticism, France, or Russia. Nowak's interest centers above all on Bobkowski the great original writer. As he wittily and soberly observes "Andrzej Bobkowski. . . found a place in Polish culture because he was remarkably skillful with his pen, and not because of his bicycle pump or model-making files."

According to Nowak, the secret of the appeal and relevance of Bobkowski's writing lies in its style, which is inventive and innovative. He emphasizes that the author of *Sketches with the Quill* entertained literary ambitions from the very beginning, even though he often distanced himself from professional writers. It is in this framework, Nowak argues, that one should consider *Sketches with the Quill* and its discrepancies with the manuscript version. The 1957 book was designed as a work of literary art, and this is how it should be read. In a sense, it is Bobkowski's "concealed novel," his "summa of art and thought," whose final shape was influenced by his previous literary experience, as well as by his life after the war. The latter was decisive for the radical evolution of the writer's attitude towards the United States and the Jews.

Nowak insightfully demonstrates the singularity of Bobkowski's writing. Sometimes analyzing only short passages from his works, the critic succeeds in pointing out the compositional and linguistic subtleties of Bobkowski's style. Applying multiple perspectives, he also develops the eponymous metaphor of an electric arc, drawn from one of Bobkowski's letters. According to Nowak, the beauty of *Sketches with the Quill* as well as of Bobkowski's letters and short stories is that, as in an electric arc, the author combined in them radically different literary conventions and ensuing types of experiencing the world that seem to occupy

opposite poles and are divided by impenetrable borders. In Bobkowski's works, reality and the man who experiences it become one great whole in a process characterized by suddenness, internal tension, and dynamic change. Dominant in his writing is "the movement of blending together into one—in an electric flash—different axiological energies" (123) since the writer aims for "voracious absorption" of the world and "sudden identity-forming joining up with something else" (352). Also characteristic of Bobkowski is the "constantly repeated and purposefully renewed admiration for the beauty of being, which manifests itself in forms of culture, nature tamed by man, as well as in airplanes at the Mobile airport or landscape seen from the Empire State Building" (211). An especially important role is played by sensualization and aestheticization of experience, and in particular by the phenomenal visual and aural "attentiveness" of the author of *Sketches with the Quill*.

Connected with this is Bobkowski's specific type of spirituality, which Nowak outlines in the fourth chapter of his monograph. The writer has often been associated with "pagan" vitalism, Epicureanism, and even pantheism, yet the spiritual foundation of his work is Christianity or, to be more precise, Catholicism. It is a peculiar kind of Catholicism, distinguished by "epiphanic discovery of the value. . . of 'ordinary existence'" (153) and "conceiving of ordinary things as traces of unchanging order" (154). As Nowak emphasizes, the originality of Bobkowski's position consists in the fact that "while accepting the message of the New Testament, he does not reject the charms of earthly life" (170), and even believes that one comes to faith "through admiration of the magnificence of the visible world" (333).

This can be seen in Bobkowski's last texts, comprising a kind of "diary of the dying days" that Nowak discusses as a manifestation of Christian spirituality. "After all, one needs God just as one needs oxygen, and the spirit is not only reason, but also feeling," Bobkowski wrote when facing death, and further added: "When one wants to prove that God exists, this is where real stupidity begins." One may trace the roots of this spirituality back to the tradition of the

First Republic of Poland, i.e., to Sarmatism with which Bobkowski was sometimes associated in critical interpretations, once by Jan Błoński and more recently by Marta Wyka.

It would be difficult to list here all the discoveries of Nowak's fascinating book. The American reader may want to look at the discussion of Bobkowski's attitude toward the United States. As already mentioned, during the Second World War Bobkowski was a fierce enemy of America; together with many in Europe, he regarded it as a threat analogical to the threat of communism. Very telling in this context is the title of Dandieu and Aron's much-publicized book *Le Cancer américain* [1931]. In the case of Bobkowski, the change came with the Guatemalan experience, and especially with his travels to the States. As a result, he became an ardent believer in "Americanism." In a letter to his mother he wrote that the stay in America feels "like an injection of caffeine," or like "having some pins prickle my bottom, a kind of joyful restlessness on coming across something different and really new."

This change of view exemplifies what Nowak calls Bobkowski's "openness to the world." Even more importantly, America "played the role of a catalyst for the aesthetic taste" of the author of *Coco de Oro*" (48) and opened him to modernism. The wartime Bobkowski was fascinated with Balzac, Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers; the postwar Bobkowski ever more often turned to the English-language fiction. He admired Greene, Waugh, Marshall, and Kerouac. *Sketches with the Quill* can be called "the Polish equivalent of *On the Road*" (50), and Bobkowski as a figure, with his cult of authenticity, freedom, and youth, foreshadowed the beat generation of the 1960s (55).

Emerging from Nowak's remarks is a picture of Bobkowski as a modern writer who is often in conflict with modernity, hence the paradoxes. For example, although he was conservative in his opinions about modern art, Bobkowski's descriptions of the world approached futurism or cubism (275). He engaged with classically modernist themes and fascinations (e.g. city, street, machine, everyday life, film, movement) and techniques (juxtapositions, simultaneity),

yet at the same time he did not lose faith in language as a tool for describing reality. Unlike modernist authors, Bobkowski did away with the alleged antinomy between natural man and the civilized one. He testified to values rather than challenging them. He disregarded the view, so important to modernism, that emotionalism and intellectualism are each other's opposites. He was a deeply religious man, which placed him in opposition to the modern antimetaphysical currents. Nowak interestingly juxtaposes Bobkowski's Catholicism with the atheism of Gombrowicz and Nałkowska.

"It seems that Bobkowski belongs to a non-canonical, heretic, separate trend of modern literature" (134), the author of *On Andrzej Bobkowski's Way of Writing* argues, describing his protagonist as a "freak" of modernity (178). Perhaps he should be counted among the "antimoderns" portrayed in Antoine Compagnon's notable book (*Les-antimodernes*, 2005) that reconstructed within French literature a trend extending from Joseph de Maistre to Roland Barthes.

The distinctness of Andrzej Bobkowski's modernity certainly makes him a particularly relevant author, especially for the readership in Poland where modernity is still identified with secularism. Through his "life-writing," the author of *Sketches with the Quill* showed with literary ingenuity that the other modernity is possible as well. This too is pointed out in Maciej Nowak's book.

Translated by Zofia Ziemann

Trapped in the Labyrinth

A Gothic Soul: A Novella, by Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic. Translated from the Czech by Kirsten Lodge. Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2015. 143 pages. ISBN 978-80-86264-46-2. Hardcover.

Terrence O'Keeffe

More than a century after its brief flowering, it is difficult to respond to the concerns and aims of the Decadent Movement (if movement it ever was, rather than a loose assemblage of individuals, some thoroughly

demoralized by modern life and others defiantly flamboyant in their contempt for the same) without being tempted to laugh or at least smile with wry irony. "What were they thinking?" and "Much ado about nothing" are likely responses. The latter of these reactions would not be foreign to Jiří Karásek, and perhaps even approved by him. At the time he wrote *A Gothic Soul* [1900], he believed his contemporaries had been hollowed out by reality, that reality had exhausted itself. Therefore the ado about the "nothingness" of an introverted imagination that fixes itself on poetic fancies disconnected from everyday concerns, society, and history pointed, for him, to some kind of redemption. The aesthetics of decadence, its fascination with death and decay became the goal of a worthwhile life, compared to which quotidian reality and its artistic representation seemed pallid and pointless. As Karásek notes in his introduction to the novel, life and "reality" are transient and ultimately empty—perhaps because they end for the individual in death but their transfiguration through art is lasting and worthy of contemplation and indulgence. Thereby chronic anxiety caused by the prospect of death is tamed. More specifically, when it comes to intense human relationships the actual beloved may in time become as horrid and repulsive as its corpse will one day be, but love poetry will not decay or lose its allure; its artificial emotions are more affecting and more durable than the fluctuating ones of an earthly love affair. This idea—that one can read or recite an evocative line of poetry repeatedly without it ever stalling—is probably mistaken.

The stream of imagination (a term Karásek preferred to "stream of consciousness") of an individual alienated from his surroundings and believing that improvements in human beings and their social institutions are illusory is therefore a very fit subject for the Decadent writer. Such an imagination is the subject of *A Gothic Soul*, whose solitary, nameless protagonist I will call "the Troubled Man." It hardly matters whether or not the author's creation is plausible or that his emotional agonies and ecstasies lack "objective correlatives." It is the artful depiction of the wavering motion of his mind that establishes the