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Publishing Circulation Systems Versus the Book Market in Today's Poland

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If our aim is to describe the mechanisms driving the contemporary book market in Poland, a market of which literature is a part, then we will discover that one of our basic tasks is to redefine its publishing circulation systems in order to avoid undue simplification and to view the publishing map of Poland in its entire complexity. In an age when the "McDonaldization of culture" is frequently offered as a catchy diagnosis, there exists a temptation to exaggerate and succumb to the illusion of an all-encompassing homogenization accompanied by total chaos. Though not completely devoid of empirical grounds, such as the ubiquity of consumerism or the law of supply and demand that is characteristic of the free market, this vision has the crucial flaw that it is precisely that – a vision – and as such it fails to account for many of the details. Yet it is these nuances that generate the many paradoxes that can be observed in the way literature functions in society in the context of other books, audiobooks, the internet, CDs and DVDs.

Here is the first: few would doubt that today all books, with no exception – from novels and theoretical works on Polish literature to self-help books and joke books – must compete equally in the market battle to win customers, a battle that determines, to a certain degree, their sales, and indirectly affects their reception as well. At the

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same time, a cursory glance at the circulation of academic books and novels, to take but two examples, leads us to the obvious conclusion that they differ in terms of the size of the print run and the way in which they are financed. The former, typically published in short printing runs by small university publishing houses, are generally financed by various institutions, while novels, which are invested in by private businesses, must, to a greater degree, respond to self-regulating economic mechanisms. The differences can also be seen in the distribution channels, both wholesale and retail. While academic literature rarely appears on the shelves of large chains due to the high promotional costs and is therefore sold mainly in specialized bookstores, the natural setting for the novel, particularly thrillers and crime novels, is the "book supermarket," where a constant battle is waged for the status of being the bestseller.

There is a long tradition of reflecting on the circulation systems of literature in the field of literary sociology in Poland; suffice it to mention the work by Stefan Żółkiewski,[1] Janusz Lalewicz,[2] the reflections of Oskar Stanisław Czarnik, which contributed to the formation of the topic,[3] and the historical-literary work titled *Próba scalenia* [*An Attempt at Consolidation*] by Tadeusz Drewnowski.[4] Yet the problem lies in the fact that these perspectives cannot be applied to contemporary times, as they referred to a completely different historical reality. Żółkiewski, who discerned five circulation systems in the period between 1918 and 1932 (high art, trivial, pulp, literature "for the people," and village fair circulations), wrote of times in which the dominant medium (even within the realm of so-called popular literature) was the printed word. Meanwhile a crucial breakthrough occurred in the 1960s: the end of the "Gutenberg era" and the dawn of the "electronic media era," to use the catchy phrase proposed by McLuhan. This revolution had a significant impact not just on the position of literature, but on all other books as well. Oskar Stanisław Czarnik, on the other hand, described the literary circulation systems in post-1945 Poland in reference to distinctive political and economic

1 Stefan Żółkiewski, *Kultura literacka 1918-1932* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1973).

2 Janusz Lalewicz, *Komunikacja językowa i literatura* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1975), Lalewicz, *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej. Problemy rozpowszechniania i odbioru literatury* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1985).

3 For example, the entry *Obiegi społeczne literatury* [*Social Circulations of Literature*] in Oskar Czarnik, *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*, ed. Alina Brodzka et al. (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1992).

4 Tadeusz Drewnowski, *Próba scalenia. Obiegi, wzorce, style* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004).

circumstances of the time, when a truly free market for books was practically non-existent, as it was subject to the central planning of the state. In the context of the Polish People's Republic, one can hardly discuss the notion of the postmodern consumer society as observed in the West in the 1960s onwards, and which only began to emerge in Poland after 1989.[5]

Any attempt to describe publishing circulation systems in contemporary Poland must therefore begin with the somewhat trivial observation that the main factors stimulating culture today, and which differentiate it from the interwar and communist period, are a late-capitalist consumer lifestyle[6] and the domination of electronic media and the entertainment industry. As brutal as this might sound, the success of a publishing endeavor today hinges largely upon its economic value, while its remaining values, regrettably, are typically a matter of less concern. The quality of participation in the book market is determined by costly distribution, which is the *sine qua non* condition for reaching mass consumers, and by the contributions of the media that influence the choices readers make.

Undoubtedly one of the most important tasks ahead of us is to accurately locate the main circulation system. It is certainly insufficient to state that this circulation is popular and commercial in nature. The first problems arise at very moment we attempt to define popular literature, even if we were to use the adjective "popular" only in reference to fiction. In her review of various methodologies for the study of popular literature, Anna Martuszewska does point out the need to reflect upon texts that belong to the category of pop-culture,[7] however the author fails to offer a clear definition of this term.

Agnieszka Fulińska, on the other hand, proposes a rather artificial division between commercial and popular literature. The former, according to the scholar, is like a "manufacturing process" conducted by the literary industry, in

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5 In contrast, the admittedly catchy network topologies proposed by Lalewicz – "ad hoc," "institutionalized," "star," and "bus" – are essentially suspended in an abstract void, considering the fact that the scholar illustrates them using examples that can hardly be considered typical of literary communication (telephone networks, radio, "Chinese whispers"). (See Janusz Lalewicz, *Komunikacja językowa i literatura*, 121.) On the other hand, the chapter devoted to circulations in *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*, published ten years later, is largely a commentary on the views espoused by Escarpit and Żółkiewski (Lalewicz, *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*, 139–167).

6 For more on this subject, see Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life is a Paid-for Experience* (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

7 Anna Martuszewska, "Jak rozbierać „tę trzecią"? O badaniach literatury popularnej," in *Nowe problemy metodologiczne literaturoznawstwa*, ed. Henryk Markiewicz and Janusz Sławiński (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1992), 273.

which "neither the individuality of the author nor the reader matters."[8] In the latter case, the goal is to publish "literary works" that approach the standards of high culture. This division becomes vague when we consider the fact that Fulińska's reasoning is mainly focused on the economic factor. The conclusion is that whatever is sold in large volume can for some reason be unpopular, and vice-versa: that whatever is popular among the readers may not have any commercial value.

Of course, the localization of literary circulation systems (or publishing circulation systems in general) cannot take place in a methodological vacuum; it must be based on criteria of some sort. The researcher has at his or her disposal several possibilities, each of which involves a margin of error and has certain drawbacks. The first criterion, aesthetics, inherently comes with the risk of falling into the trap of excessive axiology, which, at best, can result in the reinforcement of judgmental dichotomies (high-art literature vs. mass-market literature), and, at worst, an aristocratic rejection of popular literature entirely as a subject that is beneath any serious reflection.[9] Such an approach precludes any description of the complex relationships that exist between circulations, some of which will inevitably be downplayed or overlooked entirely. To put it in visual terms, this would be akin to plotting on a map only the roads that we ourselves travel.

The risk involved in this approach goes beyond merely reinforcing the existing axiological opposition between the "high" and the "popular," or the creation of new ones ("popular literature" vs. "commercial literature"). Even the status of the positive pole is not as clear as it might seem if we consider the fact that the canon comprising high-art literature is subject to incessant modification that results in the inclusion of new works previously regarded as noncanonical. Though it is based on tradition and various, often contradictory, aesthetic concepts, it is legitimized by the power of social institutions that represent the "field of power"[10] and consecrate this canon: critics, renowned writers, and, above all, universities and the Ministry of Education. Thus, if we are to be precise, rather than speaking of some substantial form of high-art literature, we should discuss certain conventions, genres, or individual literary works that, by force

8 Agnieszka Fulińska, "Dlaczego literatura popularna jest popularna?," *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2003): 56.

9 Authors who have warned against creating oppositions of this type include, for instance, Anna Martuszewska ("Jak rozbierać 'tę trzecią'?," 275–279). See also the equally brilliant essay by Krzysztof Uniłowski, "Z popem na ty," *Pogranicza* 2 (2007).

10 I have borrowed the concept of the "field" from Pierre Bourdieu. See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Teoria obiektów kulturowych*, trans. Andrzej Zawadzki, in *Odkrywanie modernizmu*, ed. Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 1998).

of tradition, authority, and social practice, are perceived as artistic. The status of the opposite pole in this opposition is equally difficult to determine. If we were to employ such minimalistic quantifiers as sales numbers and readership, we would discover, first of all, that some books popularly associated with "high" literature enjoy commercial success, as proved by the examples of Olga Tokarczuk, Wiesław Myśliwski, and Andrzej Stasiuk.[11] Secondly, it is impossible to predict which of the titles currently classified as second-rate popular literature will one day be consecrated and included in the canon.

The matter is only made more complicated by the critics, who increasingly resemble hunters prowling the media in search of a new literary star: suffice it to mention the case of Dorota Masłowska. This phenomenon weakens the division between the artistic and mass-market circulations, since critics, as Przemysław Czapliński astutely observes, must collaborate with the mass media if they are to be heard at all, which, paradoxically, undermines the authority of those who write literary reviews and evaluate books, and it erodes the sovereignty of the high culture they represent.[12]

The second criterion, one that serves as a point of departure for reflection on literary circulation systems, was proposed within the field of literary sociology in Poland by Stefan Żółkiewski, who wrote of the "d i s t i n c t s o c i a l f u n c t i o n s" of texts" and the "individual nature of the readers' needs," which those texts satisfy.[13] Such a perspective inevitably leads towards reception theories and their associated methodological problems. The fundamental question, in this case, can be summed up as follows: if we were to organize the social map of literature based, for example, on the category of the horizons of expectation proposed by Jauss[14] and the implementation

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11 One interesting list is the EMPiK TOP 20 for October 8 to 21, 2007. At 1st place is Marek Krajewski's *Dżuma w Breslau* (a new release); at 3rd place is *Life*, by Paulo Coelho (which comes as no surprise); 4th: *Bieguni*, by Olga Tokarczuk (a new release); 8th: *Dojczland*, by Andrzej Stasiuk; 9th: *Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli*, by Wiesław Myśliwski. It is quite likely that Myśliwski's novel returned to the TOP 20 as a result of having won the Nike Prize. The TOP 20 list published by the bookstore chain Matras for October 11–17, 2007, is similar: 1st place: *Dżuma w Breslau*, Marek Krajewski; 2nd: *Bieguni*, Olga Tokarczuk; 3rd: *Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli*, Wiesław Myśliwski; 6th: *Life*, Paulo Coelho; 13th: *Dojczland*, Andrzej Stasiuk. Interestingly, the next edition of the list (November 1–7, 2007) includes Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's *Dzienniki 1911–1955* [*Diaries, 1911–1955*]. (www.wirtualnywydawca.pl).

12 Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), 130–131.

13 Żółkiewski, *Kultura literacka 1918-1932*, 412.

14 See Hans Robert Jauss, *Historia literatury jako prowokacja*, trans. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 1999), 145–150, 161–167.

of those expectations, then what are the genuine expectations of the actual reader, and what sensations does he or she experience when reading? In order to examine the actual reception, we would have to rely on some empirical "reception testimonies,"[15] otherwise we would merely be engaging in pointless theoretical discussions.

Finally, a third possible criterion would be the category of distribution. This idea is not at all new, as these sociological grounds lay the foundation for the classification of literature in the Polish People's Republic as official or underground, published in Poland or published by Polish émigrés. From this perspective, the focus of our attention would be empirical authors, readers/clients, publishers, wholesalers, booksellers, advertisers, the mass media, and institutions supporting literature. A perspective of this type is not without its shortcomings: it can easily lead one to the seemingly plausible conclusion that in the circumstances of the free market and its inherent struggle to win customers, books are essentially just another commodity. At that point we are on the verge of being mired in numbers and statistics, and losing sight of not just literature, but any book at all. Reports published by book marketing specialists such as Łukasz Gołębiowski and Marcin Świtała, while interesting, testify to the reality of this threat.[16]

Nevertheless, if we intend to ground our analysis in "hard" empiricism and seek out credible data, then we can hardly ignore this criterion. I believe there is an opportunity to be found in the study of distribution channels, which is tied to research on genres and the target reader-consumer. These can prove to be highly informative, provided that, rather than constructing static models, we attempt to find answers to the question of the mechanism that shapes circulations today and will do so in the near future. It is also important that we not limit ourselves to general and catchy assertions, but focus instead on the nuances, such as the complex nexuses between the main stream and its various branches. It may even be discovered that the book market in Poland today is at once centralized and stratified; centripetal and centrifugal; brick-and-mortar and virtual. One of the factors that can be used to describe these contradictions could be distribution.

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15 A term coined by Michał Głowiński (see *Dzieło wobec odbiorcy. Szkice z komunikacji literackiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), 136–153).

16 For example, Łukasz Gołębiewski, *Rynek książki w Polsce w 2007*, vol. 1: *Wydawnictwa*, vol. 2: *Dystrybucja* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Multico, 2007); Marcin Świtała, *Zachowania konsumentów i marketing na rynku książki* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Analiz, 2005).

From this perspective, a portrayal of the circulation system (i.e., the "flow," "distribution,"[17] or, as a commodity, the "trade" of books[18]) would mainly entail an examination of the methods of distribution and free-market mechanisms, and, to a lesser extent, the publisher profile, the sender, the type of receiver (specifically, the reader-consumer[19]), as well as other factors such as academic and educational institutions, television, periodicals, and literary criticism. I will explore these issues later in the text.

The Main Circulation

In result of the systemic transformation that took place in Poland after 1989, the nature of the main circulation system became popular and commercial. It should be noted, however, that its "popular-commercial" character is more a product of sales performance and the forces involved in distribution and promotion than a response to the readers' alleged preference for books addressed exclusively to an unsophisticated, mass-market audience. This aspect of the distribution system has been pointed out by several authors, including Przemysław Czapliński, who aptly described this circulation as the "book highway."[20]

This "book highway" – to continue the use of this catchy metaphor – is de facto controlled by a handful of retail monopolists, that is, large bookstore

17 Polish: *rozpowszechnianie*. Cf. *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*, 730.

18 See Lalewicz, *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*, 143. The same scholar also describes circulation as "storage" (*Komunikacja językowa i literacka*, 127), which seems rather controversial. It is one thing to "store" a copy of a book on a bookshelf at home or at a library, and quite another to "store" the entire printing at a warehouse because buyers cannot be found. The latter can hardly be described as participation in any sort of circulation.

19 "To a lesser extent" because today, in contrast to what Żółkiewski wrote, a circulation is not characterized by the "flow" of texts within "particular circles of readers" that are isolated from other circles which, in turn, would be associated with some separate circulation (see Żółkiewski, *Kultura literacka 1918–1932*, 412). For example, students of liberal arts faculties read academic papers (which belong to the specialized academic circulation), as well as crime and fantasy novels, which are part of the popular-commercial main circulation. The latter, meanwhile, are certainly read by audiences other than the students and faculty of universities. The same is true of the writers and publishers, who can participate in various circulations (e.g., Umberto Eco, to name but one). This was even observed by Żółkiewski, who nevertheless noted that, in the past, a psychophysical writer who operated in more than one circulation did so through strictly separated sender roles, and assumed the role of the "literary technician," for instance, under a pseudonym (ibid., 413, 444–445).

20 Polish: *książkostrada*. Czapliński, *Powrót centrali*, 26.

chains. Alongside the two largest giants, EMPiK and Matras, who have dominated the market for many years, Dom Książki (particularly its subsidiary Książka Warszawa S.A.) held a substantial share of the market, as did the online retailer Merlin. A growing role is played by mail-order book clubs such as Świat Książki and Klub dla Ciebie.[21] This circulation is additionally serviced by just a few giant wholesale distributors that set the conditions for publishers, including Firma Księgarska Jacek Olesiejuk, Azymut, Wikr, Wkra, Matras, and Platon.[22] Czapliński's observation that "centralized control" had returned to the book market after 1989 seems particularly accurate and astute with regard to distribution.

However, we would encounter a problem if we were to pose the question of what books were commercially successful in this circulation and if we were to attempt to create a typology of them similar to the one proposed by Żółkiewski. It would then turn out that the main circulation, the one in which the greatest number of readers-consumers participate, is wildly heterogeneous and cannot be classified using the traditional dichotomy of "fine" and "popular" literature. An analysis of the admittedly influential and commercially effective bestseller lists published by EMPiK and Matras is enough to confound any expectations one might have as a literary scholar. A cursory glance at two lists published in October and November of 2007, in which EMPiK's TOP 20 bestsellers included novels by Marek Krajewski (*Dżuma w Breslau* [*Plague in Breslau*]), Vargas Llosa (*The Bad Girl*), Olga Tokarczuk (*Bieguni* [*Flights*]), Harlan Coben (*The Final Detail*), Andrzej Stasiuk (*Dojczland*), and Wiesław Myśliwski (*Traktat o* łuskaniu *fasoli* [*A Treatise on Shelling Beans*]). Also featured are books by Leszek Kołakowski (*Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny* [*Interesting Times, Turbulent Times*]), Umberto Eco (*On Ugliness*), Tomasz Lis (*Pis-neyland*), Sempé and Goscinny (*Histoires inédites du Petit Nicolas*), and the self-help book *I ty możesz być supertatą* [*You, Too, Can be a Superdad*] by Dorota Zawadzka.[23] Like other bestseller lists, this one appears to be completely

21 See Gołębiewski, *Rynek książki w Polsce w 2007*, vol. 2: *Dystrybucja*, 149.

22 Ibid., 52.

23 Lists covering October 8 to 21, 2007, and October 22 to November 4, 2007. The same is true of the TOP 20 list published by the bookstore chain Matras. Here are the data for November 1 to 11, 2007, and November 8 to 14, 2007: 1st: *Histoires inédites du Petit Nicolas*, René Goscinny and Jean-Jacques Sempé; 2nd: *Dżuma w Breslau*, Marek Krajewski; 4th: *Bieguni*, Olga Tokarczuk; 5th: *Pis-neyland*, Tomasz Lis; 9th: *On Ugliness*, Umberto Eco; 13th: *Traktat o* łuskaniu *fasoli*, Wiesław Myśliwski; 15th: *Dojczland*, Andrzej Stasiuk. The second list: 1st: *Histoires inédites du Petit Nicolas*, René Goscinny and Jean-Jacques Sempé; 2nd: *Pamiętnik* [*Diary*], Paweł Jasienica; 4th: *Dżuma w Breslau*, Marek Krajewski; 7th: *Bieguni*, Olga Tokarczuk; 9th: *Pis-neyland*, Tomasz Lis; 10th: *Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli*, Wiesław Myśliwski; 11th:

chaotic, with "artistic" literature appearing alongside crime novels, political books, interviews, biographies, self-help books, children's books, young adult literature, and joke books.

Yet, more importantly, there is another striking fact that contradicts the traditional "high-art" vs. "popular" opposition: namely, that artistic literature can also be popular and commercially successful, at least in the sense that it is purchased by the mass-market consumer. There is another fact that testifies to the weakness of this dichotomy: the giant bookstore chains that make up the commercial "book highway" are, as we know, the very ones who hold the costly book signings for the so-called "top shelf" authors.

To use Żółkiewski's old typology, we might say that today both "high-art" literature and trivial or pulp tiles often meet in the same distribution channel. The slight sense of chaos is further exacerbated by the fact that the main circulation includes, alongside quality fiction, non-fiction and cookbooks, such items as periodicals, CDs and DVDs, audiobooks, and even stationery and toys. Thus we observe, on the one hand, the concentration of distribution and, on the other, heterogeneity in the range of products.

The first of these two phenomena is clearly tied to the business operations of large bookstore chains, the goal of which is to achieve a monopoly, which is nothing extraordinary in the free-market world. The heterogeneity, and sometimes even randomness, of the offer is a result of it being addressed to a broad, urban audience; essentially, the everyman, a person of an undefined sex, age, education, and interests. The business strategy can be summed up in a simple rule: "something for everyone." In terms of the efficiency of distribution, such heterogeneity in the product range has a centripetal effect, because it enables the concentration of potential readers-consumers in a single chain, taking them away from small, niche bookstores.

The challenge involved in characterizing the main circulation in Poland lies not just in the fact that, rather than being focused in a single bookstore chain, this circulation is spread out across several stores that compete with each other and thus influence the nature of the market. The large-scale distribution of books currently takes two forms: brick-and-mortar (stores with a specific physical location) and virtual (the Internet). The two dimensions typically overlap and complement each other, as both large chains and small bookstores combine brick-and-mortar operations with online and mail-order sales (including EMPiK, Świat Książki, Klub dla Ciebie, and even the online retailer Merlin, which has opened its first physical store). The virtualization of the book market may mark

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On Ugliness, Umberto Eco; 20th: *Dojczland*, Andrzej Stasiuk. (www.wirtualnywydawca.pl, accessed May 1, 2015.)

a genuine revolution. However, it is likely too early to draw any far-reaching conclusions.

Finally, there are supermarkets, which cannot be overlooked, considering the fact that, as Łukasz Gołębiewski argues, if we were to combine retail bookstore chains and supermarket chains into a single analytic category, the latter would rank among the five largest booksellers in Poland, following EMPiK and Matras.[24] However, a consistent application of the traffic metaphor would require us to concede that supermarkets, like kiosks, are at most a single lane on the book highway. The common feature of hypermarkets and large chains such as EMPiK is, undoubtedly, their mass-market target consumer. Nevertheless, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that large supermarkets do not focus on selling books, which are just one of many products available on their shelves. Furthermore, their range of titles is often limited to children's books, dictionaries, self-help books and bestsellers.

Among the side lanes on the book highway, there is also the so-called "kiosk" circulation, which is by no means synonymous with newspaper kiosks in the narrow sense, nor with the most low-grade form of literary production such as Harlequin romances. Rather, it refers to books (typically albums or literary masterpieces) published in high print runs and distributed as entire series with daily newspapers and weekly magazines.[25]

The share of this circulation in the main stream should not be underestimated, not just because it encompasses traditional kiosks, grocery stores, and, naturally, large supermarket chains that also carry periodicals. There are two other reasons, ones that only indirectly involve distribution. Firstly, the printing of a single title of this type sometimes exceeds twenty thousand copies. Secondly, while these editions do not feature new releases or the current literary titles, their domain is that of literary classics, which reach a mass audience by way of newspapers and the points of distribution typically associated with them.

This circulation challenges the spatial categories that are traditionally used to describe the relationships between circulation systems and cultural registers. In this case, both vertical categories and categories of range prove unsatisfactory. If we were to apply a vertical perspective, we would have to conclude

24 Gołębiewski, *Rynek książki w Polsce w 2007*, vol. 2: *Dystrybucja*, 137–138.

25 A few examples of such series are: "Klasyka XIX wieku" ["19th Century Classics"] and "Kolekcja XX wieku" ["20th Century Collection"], published by *Gazeta Wyborcza*; "Klasycy sztuki" ["Art Classics"], published by *Rzeczpospolita*, and "Polska literatura współczesna" ["Contemporary Polish Literature"] by the weekly magazine *Polityka*.

that that which belongs to the "high" register is distributed through means hitherto associated with that which is "low" (newspapers; cheap, disposable, utilitarian objects). On the other hand, if we use the "elite" vs. "egalitarian" opposition, it would appear that the aristocratic world of literary masterpieces descends from its ivory tower and emerges, almost literally, onto the streets. It is telling that, as part of a collection published by the weekly magazine *Polityka*, kiosks and grocery stores have stocked books by Marek Hłasko, Czesław Miłosz, Olga Tokarczuk, Julian Stryjkowski, Edward Redliński, Paweł Huelle, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Hanna Krall, Wiesław Myśliwski, Witold Gombrowicz, Tadeusz Borowski, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz alongside food products, cosmetics, newspapers and crossword puzzle books.

Circulations of Limited Scope

Along with highways, the map of Polish publishing circulation systems of course features local roads, which I refer to as profiled circulations of limited scope. An exhaustive typology and characterization of these circulations would require the space of a voluminous book, therefore I will only discuss the three I consider particularly relevant, namely, the specialized academic, religious and literary circulations.

1. The Academic Circulation

The specialized academic circulation is characterized by a particular type of readership, which comprises mainly of students, teachers, university lecturers, and others. This circulation has its own niche bookstores that do not, however, form any chain that competes with the main circulation. It also operates its own magazines and, furthermore, often receives additional financial support from institutions belonging to the "field of consecration" and the "field of power," or the relevant ministries and universities.

From 2001 to 2006, the revenue from the sales of academic books amounted to 25.1 percent of the market, while textbooks made up 28.5 percent.[26] These data are hardly surprising if one considers the fact that the demand for academic literature is associated with the necessity of education and stimulated by institutions of higher learning and the Ministry of Education. Academic and popular science books also occasionally become bestsellers, though this applies exclusively to titles written by intellectual celebrities such

26 Calculated from data provided by Łukasz Gołębiewski, *Rynek książki w Polsce w 2007* vol. 1: *Wydawnictwa*, 88.

as Umberto Eco and Norman Davies,[27] or authors whose books discuss sensitive subjects, such as *Fear*, by Jan Tomasz Gross.[28]

Still, the overall share of academic literature in the main circulation is unimpressive and contradicts the statistics. First, much of the revenue from sales is a result of high prices, rather than large printings (which average 3,000 copies). Second, this circulation is present in niche bookstores, rather than large chains. This can be explained by the high costs of distribution and promotion, which pose a barrier to entry for most small academic publishing houses, despite the subsidies they receive from their associated universities and other institutions. Only large publishers such as the Kraków-based Znak can afford to pay for distribution and promotion through large bookstore chains, and even they are willing to pay such premiums only in the case of potential bestsellers that can sell out and recoup the company's investment. Smaller publishers are forced to distribute their titles through alternative channels that circumvent wholesalers and large chains. This method of operation allows them, at best, to recuperate the cost of publishing the books. Due to the lack of funds for distribution and promotion, academic books often have a very limited availability, and are sometimes excluded from any circulation system whatsoever, if we consider the fact that readers cannot purchase a given publication if they are unaware of its existence. Such is the case with certain books that are promoted only through word of mouth or distributed at academic conferences.

2. The Religious Circulation

The existence of a profiled religious book circulation is a significant phenomenon in the Polish market. The average revenue from sales of all books of this type in 2001–2006 amounted to 5.1 percent of the entire market.[29] The religious literature available in the main stream is limited largely to titles devoted to, or written by, John Paul II, of which *Pamięć i tożsamość* [*Memory and Identity*] sold 1.2 million copies in 2005.[30] Even if we account for the specific nature of 2005, the year of John Paul II's death, it should be noted that the sale

27 Norman Davies's *Europe East and West*, for example, was listed at number one on the EMPiK TOP 20 for August 27 to September 9, 2007.

28 Second place on the EMPiK TOP 20 list for January 14 to 27, 2008. Gross's book lost only to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

29 Calculated based on the report by Łukasz Gołębiewski (vol. 1: *Wydawnictwa*, 88).

30 Ibid., 33.

of "papal" literature has dipped insignificantly and continues to top pre-2004 sales.[31]

This circulation has its own audience and particular distribution channels. Religious books are addressed to a specific symbolic and religious community that is absent from the academic circulation system, which is dispersed among various specializations and their associated "sub-circulations" (liberal arts, medicine, law, economics, etc.). The greater cohesiveness of this circulation stems not only from the shared world view of its readership, which is obvious, but from the somewhat hermetic nature of the distribution system and the homogeneity of the titles. This system operates through what can be described as a micro-chain (Księgarnia św. Jacka has eighteen locations, as of 2006); it has its own printing houses (e.g., Drukarnia św. Wojciecha in Poznań), its own publishing houses (WAM, Biały Kruk, Edycja św. Pawła, Jedność, W drodze[32]) and even Catholic wholesalers.

Interestingly, there is a certain dialectic of centripetalism and dispersal inscribed into the circulation of religious books. On the one hand, this circulation is characterized by a standard range of titles addressed to a formatted, Catholic audience, while, on the other, it is noticeably dispersed, as this circulation includes, alongside books, such items as religious merchandise, icons, CDs and vestments. It resembles in this regard, albeit at a smaller scale, large bookstore chains, with the difference that the religious circulation is ideologically c l o s e d, while the main circulation is o p e n. For example, books such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* or Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* would never appear, for obvious reasons, in the religious circulation, while *Jesus of*

31 Ibid., 33, 131–137.

32 I have omitted from this list the publishing house Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, despite its extensive traditions and obvious associations with *Tygodnik Powszechny* and members of the Polish Church. However, in its current form, this publisher can hardly be classified as Catholic, as most of its output comprises literature belonging to the broad category of the liberal arts (prose, essays, and academic literature). In 2006 religious books made up approximately 40 percent of all the publisher's titles. Furthermore, in recent years Znak has turned out to be a significant actor in the popular-commercial circulation, publishing numerous bestsellers such as Norman Davies's *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw*, Ryszard Kapuściński's *Travels with Herodotus*, René Goscinny and Jean-Jacques Sempé's *Histoires inédites du Petit Nicolas*, Myśliwski's *Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli*, Vargas Llosa's *The Bad Girl*, and Gross's *Fear*. Among Znak's greatest commercial successes, only John Paul II's *Pamięć i tożsamość* could unambiguously be classified as "religious literature" (cf. ibid., 263–270). Interestingly, in the 1990s Znak also published a few interesting books about rock music (David Sinclair's *Rock on CD*, Gino Castaldo's *La Terra Promesa*, and Steve Turner's *Hungry for Heaven*). While only the last title was written from a Christian perspective, it did not constitute an attack on rock culture, nor did it have anything to do with religious orthodoxy.

Nazareth, by Benedict XVI, could possibly be found in the popular circulation. This situation could be compared metaphorically to a one-way entrance ramp connecting a local road to a highway.

3. The Literary Circulation

The literary circulation appears to be the most heterogeneous and problematic of the three. According to the statistics, it generated an average 18.9 percent of the revenue of the entire market from 2001 to 2006,[33] yet that is less than one fifth of all book sales, and the above data account equally for poetry books, titles on the required reading list, books assigned to students of Polish studies, crime novels, women's literature, fantasy literature, and so on. There is no particular distribution channel associated with this circulation, and its identity is defined largely by the adjective "literary" and the fact that it continues to be regarded by the general public as a vestige of what was once the "high-artistic" circulation. While, like the academic circulation, it has its own specialized periodicals (e.g., *Nowe Książki*), the most influential media in this system are currently large newspapers, weeklies, and television.

If we were to attempt to identify the characteristic features of this circulation in its sociological dimension, we would have to point to its associations with the "field of consecrating institutions" and the "field of power." After all, the literary circulation is more than just a body of literary works that travel from the author and publisher to the reader-consumer; it is a system that also comprises literary critics, schools, universities, prestigious prizes, and, finally, the Ministry of Education. These associations can be classified as direct and indirect.

The former comprise institutional operations carried out by the Ministry of Education, or alternatively, universities, with the purpose of influencing readership among children, young adults and students. Examples of such actions include school reading lists and the literary canon that every aspiring Polish Literature graduate is required to be acquainted with. Of course, these standards have, at most, a potential effect on the book market, considering that the required reading list does not consist of new releases and that libraries exist. In any case, the effect of institutional pressure is certainly not comparable to that exerted by textbooks. While the required reading list remains relatively stable and is only subject to minor modifications, textbooks undergo constant change, thus driving up demand, to a certain extent.

Literary prizes, on the other hand, including the most prestigious media prizes such as the Nike and the *Polityka* Passport, are examples of indirect

33 Calculated based on data provided by Łukasz Gołębiewski (vol. 1: *Wydawnictwa*, 88).

associations. They are indirect because while they are awarded by a specialized circle of critics and academics who carry out what can be described as the "consecration" of literary works, they are not a form of direct pressure of an institutional nature. These verdicts are, often unintentionally, increasingly a kind of literary certificate of quality to be exploited in marketing and advertising. I have already discussed this topic in an earlier section of this article. The persuasive influence of literary prizes as well as reviews in the popular press has in recent years been driven more by the potential of the media than the authority of the critics, who, as representatives of the "field of consecrating institutions," are gradually losing their positions as literary arbiters, as they are increasingly becoming a part of the "field of economic domination" typical of all production, including that which belongs to the popular-commercial circulation.

Despite the support of institutions and literary authorities associated with the "field of consecration" and the "field of power," literary fiction, by appearing in the main stream, must fight for the reader-consumer by the same rules as do self-help books, joke books and cookbooks. Otherwise it is relegated to the margins. The presence of literature in the main stream is significant. However, an examination of bestseller lists reveals that these largely consist of crime novels, women's fiction, thrillers, fantasy novels, young adult and children's books and non-fiction: all the genres that Żółkiewski, in describing the literary culture of pre-war Poland, would surely include in the trivial circulation.

Statistical data for 2006 show that the most frequently purchased genres of literature were crime novels (20 percent), romance and women's fiction (15 percent), young adult and children's literature (11 percent), non-fiction (11 percent), and various types of fantasy fiction (8 percent).[34] Poetry is not mentioned at all in the data, which means that it plays a negligible role in the main circulation. This is a result of both its relatively narrow target audience and the high costs of distribution mentioned above. Perhaps poetry, due to its elite nature, is the last bastion of what was once the "high-artistic" circulation.

Literary Circulations or Publishing Circulations?

Our definition and location of circulations as well as our assessment of their role hinges largely on our methodological assumptions: for example, whether or not we consider bestseller lists more or less credible than anonymous questionnaires and polls, or than the interpretation of statistical data compiled by book market analysts. If we were to include in the literary circulation the

34 Ibid., 64.

"sub-circulation" of the books on the required reading list, then the aforementioned 18.9 percent market share would have to be increased by an average of 2.8 percent per annum. The same is true of young adult and children's literature (averaging 8.5 percent of the revenue market share in 2001–2006), which Gołębiewski lists as a completely separate category from "literary fiction,"[35] which is a flawed approach, as the former also includes literary titles, ones that influence the circulation as a whole, such as the *Harry Potter* series and *Histoires inédites du Petit Nicolas*, by René Goscinny and Jean-Jacques Sempé. But the problem lies in how much these numbers shape the current position of literature on the overall publishing map of Poland. It appears that the traditional, sociological diagnoses offered by Stefan Żółkiewski and others explain very little today, when the "high-artistic" literary circulation is no longer the dominant one, while the homogenized main circulation has now expanded to primarily include literature that was once classified in the low-grade and inferior popular-trivial circulation. As Krzysztof Uniłowski correctly observes, "the outdated vision of a pyramid built of circulations stacked one on top of the other has been replaced by the metaphor of the network… Such a project [moreover] disrupts the stability of the divisions separating superior and inferior, dominant and subordinate, and central and peripheral areas."[36]

The metaphors that seem more appropriate in these circumstances appear to be the ones that reference horizontal space, particularly the metaphor of the highway and local roads, which not only illustrates the main circulation and the profiled circulations of a smaller scope, but also lacks the semantic ambiguity resulting from the figurative and literal meanings of the word "network." This metaphor is particularly useful when we want to point out contradictions and paradoxes, ones that Uniłowski in a sense alludes to. An observation of the contemporary Polish market reveals an interesting pattern. The closer we approach the center of distribution, the greater the degree of dispersal and heterogeneity of what is found there. The opposite is also true: the farther we go from the "book highway" towards the peripheries of distribution, the greater the cohesiveness and homogeneity. For specific examples, we need look no further than EMPiK on the one hand and, on the other, Catholic and academic bookstores.

There is one extraordinarily important issue that is worth mentioning at this point, one that involves the "horizontal" configuration of contemporary circulations. It is not at all true that the vertical configuration has completely

35 I was informed of the existence of this division by Łukasz Gołębiewski himself. The matter is discussed in a rather ambiguous manner in the book *Rynek książki w Polsce w 2007*.

36 Uniłowski, "Z popem na ty," 24.

disappeared from the public consciousness. The memory of the "high" circulation still exists; what is more, this notion is exploited by publishers when compiling the myriad "masterpiece collections" and "classical literature collections" distributed with newspapers. The very words "masterpiece" and "classical" refer to a group of "consecrated" works belonging to the "high" register. The point is that, in the current commercialized culture, the opposite poles of the former configuration have lost their distinctiveness and clarity.

There remains yet another problem. If literature has lost its privileged role on the map of book publishing and consumption, and on the contemporary cultural map in general, then are we justified in using the somewhat outdated academic terminology of "literary circulations," in the plural, inherited from the socio- and historical-literary tradition? Naturally, this is not to suggest that circulation is homogeneous, which is clearly not the case. Rather, the point is that it does not form any internal opposition that can be convincingly justified: there is no longer an official circulation vis-à-vis an underground one, nor a local circulation opposite its émigré counterpart.

Perhaps it would be best to change our approach and come to terms with the myriad "publishing circulations," of which literature is merely one part? Such a perspective would hardly be a welcome change for literary scholars. Nevertheless, this particular point of departure in the study of the subject has the benefit of facilitating the identification and description of certain social, distributional, marketing, semiotic, receptory and interpretative mechanisms, while also offering the possibility of actually influencing contemporary egalitarian, commercialized culture.

Translation: Arthur Barys