

---

 Lidia Burska
 

---

## Stefan Żółkiewski's Last Book

---

DOI: 10.18318/td.2016.en.2.5

Stefan Żółkiewski's last book, which he never completed,<sup>1</sup> impresses us with the sheer breadth of its attempt to describe one hundred years of literary culture in Poland, commencing with the end of the last century, and ending with the turbulent and still shapeless present, in 1990. If completed, it would likely have been the author's opus magnum, the crowning achievement of his theoretical explorations, one he embarked upon in the 1970s and which focused on questions concerning the function of literature in the process of social communication, the role of writers and the behavior of readers. It would likely have complemented and augmented his early writings, such as *Kultura literacka (1918–1932)* [*Literary Culture (1918–1932)*] and *Kultura, socjologia, semiotyka literacka* [*Culture, Sociology, Literary Semiotics*], which provoked rather lively interest and debates at the time.

The editors of Żółkiewski's final and unfinished book – Alina Brodzka, Maryla Hopfinger and Oskar Czarnik – decided to extract and prepare for print only a small section devoted to the final years of the period of partitions and interwar Poland. Though fragmented and

---

**Lidia Burska** (1953–2008) – she is the author of *Kłopotliwe dziedzictwo*, co-editor (with Alina Brodzka-Wald) of the series *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej*. She published in „Res Publica Nowa”, „Second Texts”, and „Gazeta Wyborcza”. Her unfinished habilitation dissertation *Awangarda i inne złudzenia. O pokoleniu '68 w Polsce* was published in 2012, it was edited by A. Brodzka-Wald, F. Burski, and M. Burska.

---

1 Stefan Żółkiewski, *Společne konteksty kultury literackiej na ziemiach polskich (1890–1939)*, ed. Alina Brodzka, Maryla Hopfinger and Oskar Czarnik (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1995), 147.

incomplete, the book *Spoleczne konteksty kultury literackiej na ziemiach polskich (1890–1939)* [*The Social Contexts of Literary Culture on Polish Lands (1890–1939)*] provides a thorough depiction of the concept behind this venture. This is facilitated by the author's clear and precisely formulated research objectives and tasks. Our relatively good grounding in the theoretical functions of the model proposed by Żółkiewski does not, however, spare us anxiety about whether this model can actually turn out to be transferable and expansive enough to encompass the rather opaque (if we reject the easy faith of ideological speech) "social contexts" of literary culture following 1945. The editors have spared us the responsibility of debating this problem.

What interests Żółkiewski most about the transformations that occur in culture is their continuity and progression; what is "repeatable, redundant, and communicable," what is "subject to regularities;" in other words a system, or, more cautiously, the structure of the whole. The author's goal is to describe this structure, to formulate hypotheses describing the "direction and axiological nature, the aim and degree of effectiveness" of these developmental tendencies. As was the case in the earlier books mentioned above, the concepts and tools of description are taken from the theories of communication and sociology; the subject matter, meanwhile, is provided by the historiography of social transformation and statistics. Żółkiewski's hypotheses fit perfectly within the boundaries marked by these disciplines of knowledge.

The first hypothesis assumes that the development of the capitalist order has resulted in the massification – and the subsequent democratization – of social communication. According to the second, the phenomenon of the massification of communication inevitably entails blurring the boundaries of participation in earlier (diverse and disconnected) local cultures associated with particular milieus, groups or clearly distinct classes. The crossing of boundaries involves migration, both in the physical sense – from villages to industrialized cities and in the spiritual sense – from regional folklore (the culture of the spoken word and illiteracy) to the ubiquitous culture of the printed word. The ultimate result of these phenomena, depicted by Żółkiewski within the context of the extensive process of their gradual accumulation and growth, is the emergence of a national culture, one that functions within a homogeneous social space.

This, in the most general terms, is the model created by Żółkiewski in his last book. The fact that he did not provoke the interest of literary scholars and that the book, published half a year ago, has gone almost completely unnoticed without any response, proves only that we live in an era of different scholarly faiths and orders (or disorders, if you prefer). It would, however, be disloyal to the late author to accuse him of failing to adapt his model to the current trends in the study of literature. I do think that we could consider

which aspects of *Spółeczne konteksty kultury literackiej* could inspire new questions and avenues of exploration.

The theoretical edifice erected by Żółkiewski has an enormous and well-stocked cellar, yet it is crowned by an impressive though controversial roof. Meanwhile, inside, instead of a well-organized interior, we find one that has been hurriedly thrown together. The book's value lies in its "material base," if you will pardon the expression: an empirical (data-based) description of the specific factors that enable participation in culture (institutions providing widespread access to education, organizations or political parties that seek ideological influence among the newly-emancipated classes, and finally, the senders and recipients of the symbolic contents of literature). The bibliography of the book deserves separate attention as well: it was compiled by the author in great abundance and with astonishing meticulousness. The sheer amount and variety of data gives them a life of their own, often in contradiction to the discourse strategy proposed by Żółkiewski.

He desires to crown his structure with a hypothesis stating that national culture is also (though not exclusively) shaped by the lengthy process of the emancipation of socially underprivileged classes (workers, peasants) – their liberation from the dominant patronage culture of the intelligentsia. In other words, the culture that first pushed these classes to participate in literary communication also, *nolens volens*, gave rise to their emancipatory aspirations. Żółkiewski writes:

The debate over emancipatory tendencies in literary culture, ones that stand in opposition to patronage tendencies, was a significant issue in the interwar years. The point was [...] whether the participation of new readers in literary communication should be subjected to the foreign (in terms of class) though familiar (in national terms) model of the cultural patron [...]. This patronage with a foreign character can never be perceived in absolute terms, as – and I strongly emphasize this – both the newly emancipated classes and the patrons shared, to a great degree, a common national tradition. Rather, it was a question of accents, dominant tones, of the extent to which these traditions were common or separate.

Yet, just as he takes such a clear stance on the origin and "equipment" of national culture, he himself subsequently obfuscates this matter. Hence the impression that the interiors of his structure are excessively makeshift, filled with mockups, which is how I consider his concepts of literary circulations (borrowed from his previous books) and of the role of the writer, as well as his excessively wholesale approach to the transformation of literature. They are too automatic and conventionally associated with empirical descriptions, as

if the author failed to perceive that the data he collected was explosive enough to blow away his old terms and dynamise the entire theoretical model. One example is Żółkiewski's excellent description of the various political parties determining the ideology of emancipatory social movements (as this was not always a matter of self-determination). Yet the manner in which these parties shaped the desired models of participation in culture also applied to shaping culture itself, including models of Polishness which inevitably absorbed "partisan," ideological, and "class" content. How did this occur? What dynamics were involved? What were the consequences in terms of national culture? These are questions that Żółkiewski leaves unanswered, but which have been brought to our attention by the very facts of the author's own biography, facts that he prudently collected. Therefore, paradoxically, the great virtue of his last work is its incompleteness, as it thus provides inspiration for further exploration and completion.

This is no easy task. Not just due to the enormous documentary work required, but also because Żółkiewski's theses are at odds with the image of national culture (and its origin) perpetuated by the collective consciousness. These theses can lay the ground for intellectually attractive yet controversial concepts, ones that will replace the "grand narratives" (of the supposed eternal spirit of tradition) with "minor narratives" about the infrastructures that facilitate and help shape social communication; about institutions, the media, politics, and social engineering; and about the people who participate in the processes of creating and understanding cultural texts. But are any of the professor's students willing to undertake such a task?

*Translation: Arthur Barys*