

# The Mainstream and the Margins Trade Places:

## The Mainstream as a “Runaway” Concept of Literary Criticism

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We may start by advancing a thesis that, obvious as it may be for literary critics, raises many questions. When we look at how the concept of the mainstream is used in contemporary literary criticism, in which, in addition to the so-called professional, most often academic critics, bloggers, journalists and authors of fan fiction also function, we learn that it is actually used in place of the old concept of the “canon” or the more contemporary concept of the “center” (as defined by Przemysław Czapliński). Canon debates took place in the 1990s and

in the new millennium, and perspectives varied; the understanding of the canon in classical 20th-century literary studies was discussed mainly in intradisciplinary terms – often in the modernist context of the autonomy of (institutionalized) literature.<sup>1</sup> The marketization of art after 1989, which made Czapliński come up with the concept of the “center,” inspired essential revisions of the concept of the canon, especially as regards its place and role in society. As the “core” of literary discourse and a stable premise for critical judgments, the canon was rooted in literary traditions, literary institutions, and the literary scene of the People’s Republic of Poland. Thus, it somewhat corresponded to the literary “Whole,” as defined by Janusz Sławiński, who discussed the disappearance of the “poetic center” in Poland in the early 1990s, just as critics began to embrace postmodern theories of crises. New local communities and aesthetics flourished.<sup>2</sup> Sławiński argued that the opinion-forming cultural “center” of the Polish People’s Republic relied on hierarchies of literary works, which, in turn, were governed by (academically and politically) institutionalized artistic rules and disseminated by 20th-century media. Indeed, the “center” was determined by abstract mechanisms of reproduction of universal cultural meanings and the critic did not perceive it as a center of political and social influences. The “return of the center,” analyzed in detail by Czapliński in his famous 2007 book, clearly showed how texts that used to be at the “center” which controlled modern social imagination moved, because of changing social contexts, towards the margins of postmodernity.<sup>3</sup> The center was from then on conditioned by market demand and competition. As a result, in the modernist binary system of, on the one hand, ambitious masterpieces and, on the other hand, popular bestsellers, the two “unexpectedly traded places” in the internal hierarchy of broadly defined culture. It certainly could not be described as a (supposedly) positive effect of postmodern transformations, the long-awaited democratization of various literary circles.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Such discussions were collected in the publication *Kanon i obrzeża* [The canon and the margins] (2005), inspired by feminist critics: Inga Iwasiów and Tatiana Czerna from the Department of Polish Literature of the 20th century at the University of Szczecin organized a thematic conference and edited the book. In Poland, canon debates took place mainly in the 1990s, among various circles. In 1993, a canon questionnaire was prepared by the weekly *Polityka*, and in 1993/1994 the canon and its revisions were discussed at academic sessions organized by The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Warsaw SPP; the results of these deliberations were published in three volumes in *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Disputed Figures of Polish Contemporary Literature] (1994, 1995, 1996). In 1994, “Znak” published a special issue devoted to the canon with contributions from, among others, Jerzy Szacki, Ireneusz Kania, and Jerzy Jarzębski. The article was a starting point for Jarzębski’s pioneering book *Apetyt na transformę* [Appetite for Change] (1997), where he discussed new phenomena in Polish prose after 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Janusz Sławiński, “Zanik centrali” [The disappearance of the center], *Kresy* 2 (1994). Reprinted in: *Prace wybrane T. 5, Przypadki poezji* [Selected works Vol. 5, Poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 335–339.

<sup>3</sup> Inga Iwasiów wrote about how values previously associated with the canon and ambitious literature “moved” to the margins; she interpreted the supposed marginalization of high literature in terms of elitism (“Wokół pojęć: kanon, homoerotyzm, historia literatury” [Around the concepts: canon, homoerotism, history of literature], *Katedra* 1 [2001]: 98–122). Apart from Czapliński, “the return of the center” was also discussed by Piotr Śliwiński (“Gorzej czy normalnie” [Worse or Normal], in: *Przygody z wolnością* [Adventures with freedom] [Kraków: Znak, 2002], 12; Kinga Dunin (“Kopciuszek, Księżę DyDo i wolność” [Cinderella, Prince DyDo and freedom], in: *Karoca z dyni* [The pumpkin coach], [Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2000], 58) and Krzysztof Uniłowski (“Cała prawda o «prozie środka», cz. 2” [The whole truth about middlebrow prose, part 2], *FA-art* 4 [2002]: 32–41).

<sup>4</sup> In “Teksty Drugie” (5 [1995]: 5–26), Edward Balcerzan wrote about “trading places unexpectedly,” expanding Sławiński’s reflections on the “disappearance of the center” in the context of the cultural, methodological and communication breakthrough. However, he focused on the effects of the disappearance of old, canonical orders, among others, in literary studies.

Before the “return of the center,” Czapliński discussed the phenomenon of “the moving margins,” which were meant to destabilize the center, in its many different meanings. This concept was, as it seems from today’s perspective, an extension of lofty ideas associated with modernism’s community-creating and value-creating powers. For Czapliński, “the moving margins” were part and parcel of a utopian democratic culture built on community values, which were, nevertheless, subject to renegotiation. Thus, it can be said that, in a sense, the dream of “the moving margins” built on Sławiński’s narrative, insofar as the approach to newly democratized Polish culture was cautiously optimistic. “Because if the margins are moving, no one occupies an inferior position forever,” Czapliński wrote, “respectively, the center is never un-touchable and unchangeable, which means that no institutionally endorsed or market-driven center may be created independently of writers, readers, and critics.”<sup>5</sup> Optimistic as this may sound, Czapliński then explained: “I refer to culture whose margins are not created by the mechanisms of depersonalized mass culture, which is interested in monetary and not spiritual value, and only pretends to be democratic. The domination of the market, using targeted media and mass promotion to reach audiences, immobilized the center and the margins.”<sup>6</sup> The very idea of a constantly renegotiated diverse canon, an exciting prospect in post-communist Poland in the early 1990s, was ultimately dismissed by literary critics – such a canon appeared to have more in common with a free-market economy than with democracy and freedom. Czapliński advanced this thesis in the introduction to the edited collection *Polityka Literatury* [Politics of Literature] (2009) – Krytyka Polityczna’s guide to new literature which heralded the famous “political turn” in post-transformation Polish criticism.<sup>7</sup>

As I have said, when Czapliński wrote about “the return of the center,” he actually wrote about the media and the publishers becoming new exclusive opinion-forming centers; book buyers now determined the value of literature and literature was dependent on the market and money. New institutionalized tools, literary awards (which were and still are founded by city councils and thus dependent on municipal cultural policies), literary festivals and galas, began to shape the literary scene in Poland.<sup>8</sup> Czapliński presented his preliminary findings on the “shifts” in value judgments that had taken place in Polish culture in the 1990s in *Ruchome marginesy*, brilliantly describing a phenomenon that perfectly corresponded to the most popular sociological (Zygmunt Bauman) and cultural (Jean Baudrillard) definitions of postmodernism in Poland. However, the nature of the “return of the center,” as preliminarily discussed in *Ruchome marginesy*, implied a secondary “immobilization” of the center and the margins – “the exchange of values” was continually taking place between the

<sup>5</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, *Ruchome marginesy* [Moving margins] (Kraków: Znak, 2002), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Czapliński, *Ruchome marginesy*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Czapliński distinguished between two “political” canons undergoing reproduction at the end of the 1990s. The nationalist canon triggered identity and patriotic debates; the liberal canon, noble and open to ever new works, concealed its tendency to “sanctify” works of literature and “create” masterpieces – authorities were no longer needed and everyone could make their free, or indeed arbitrary, choice (Przemysław Czapliński, “Polityka literatury, czyli pokazywanie języka” [The politics of literature, or showing the language/sticking the tongue out], in: *Polityka literatury* [The politics of literature], edited collection (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008, 20-21).

<sup>8</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali* [The return of the center] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), 55; Grzegorz Jankowicz, “Piękni wygrani. Wpływ nagród na strukturę pola literackiego” [Beautiful winners. The influence of awards on the structure of the literary field], in: *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu Podręcznik* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory. Textbook], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, Jan Sowa (Kraków: Korporacja Halart, 2015), 113-155.

center and what we could more accurately define as fringe culture – and thus the two were constantly being revised because the fixed assets of the literary canon were constantly being exchanged.<sup>9</sup> The constant exchange of values thus permanently replaced the accumulation of symbolic capital around fixed and stable authorities.<sup>10</sup> Not only objects of critical interest, which were assigned one value or another, were subject to exchange, but, perhaps more importantly, also value judgments, which, in the traditional canon, have traditionally evolved at a slow pace dictated by the history of literature. Respectively, margins were also ever-moving and ever-changing – promotional campaigns turned dazzling debuts into books worthy of the “center,” often overnight, while high-profile titles often lost value and returned to the margins within a year. This phenomenon of the capitalist cultural market was preliminarily described in *Powrót centrali* [The return of the center]. This constant movement of values, a situation where stable community-forming evaluative criteria are being replaced, makes the job of the literary critic difficult.<sup>11</sup> Identifying and defining evaluative criteria also proves difficult, except, perhaps, for the simplest ones (bullish literary market with its increasing values and bearish literary market with its decreasing values). The exchange and the movement of capital are autotelic. Czapliński’s remarks on the nature of the “liberal canon” put forward in *Polityka Literatry* still hold true: media attention “sanctifies” a work of literature; such an approach is indeed “canonical” in nature but the need to justify the attention disappears.<sup>12</sup>

The “return of the opinion-forming center,” described by Czapliński primarily in terms of statistical facts and sociology of literature, was, of course, recognized and defined during a long debate: Kinga Dunin wrote about “dominant public discourse,”<sup>13</sup> in 2000, a number of critics and literary scholars took part in the debate entitled *Literatura w uścisku mediów* [Literature in the grip of the media] in the magazine “Res Publica Nowa;”<sup>14</sup> Anna Nasiłowska published her famous pamphlet *Literaturka* [Little literature] in “Tygodnik Powszechny” in 2005;<sup>15</sup> and Krzysztof Uniłowski discussed the so-called middlebrow fiction (prose for the new middle class) in his books.<sup>16</sup> In a way, this debate found its most potent expression in

<sup>9</sup> The intersection of two evaluation systems, the modernist one, which relegates popular and generic productions to the margins, and the postmodern one, which excludes overly ambitious works from the mainstream is discussed by Krzysztof Uniłowski in *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi* [Elite and Popular, Mainstream and Fringe] (Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!* [Buy a book!] (Katowice: Wyd. FA-art, 2008, 204–220). I will refer to it later on in this article.

<sup>10</sup> Tomasz Warczok, Alicja Pałęcka, Piotr Marecki, “Pole literackie w Polsce po 1989 roku” [Literary field in Poland after 1989], in: *Literatura polska po 1989 w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieua. Raport z badań* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory. Report], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz et al. (Kraków: Korporacja Halart, 2014), 135–136.

<sup>11</sup> Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 372–373.

<sup>12</sup> Czapliński, *Polityka literatury*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Dunin, 41–87.

<sup>14</sup> “Literatura w uścisku mediów” [Literature in the grip of the media] [panel discussion between Przemysław Czapliński et al.], *Res Publica Nowa* 7 (2000): 49–60.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Nasiłowska, “Literaturka. Polska bez pisarzy” [Little literature. Poland without writers], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 46 (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Proza środka, czyli stereotypy literatury nowoczesnej” [Middlebrow prose, or the stereotypes of modern literature], in idem: *Granice nowoczesności. Proza polska i wyczerpanie modernizmu* [The limits of modernity. Polish prose and the end of modernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 156–195.

political literary essays published by “Ha!Art”<sup>17</sup> and “Krytyka Polityczna.”<sup>18</sup> Though their approach to the place and the social role of literature differed, all critics pointed to how the meaning and the function of the “center” changed. Dunin argued that the center no longer established the foundations for community values (whether by force or as a result of negotiation) but instead promoted fashions, invalidated all that was not fashionable, made some writers famous and rendered others obsolete.<sup>19</sup> So, the center was not so much concerned with evaluation as with marketing, and in the Polish People’s Republic the latter was associated with the margins of literary criticism. According to many contemporary writers and critics, the social (and thus political) importance of literature and criticism postulated by Dunin could be critically read against the contemporary incoherent and fluid field of literary criticism dominated by mass and social media. It is, after all, as Dunin explained, determined by ethical concerns. To what do we owe the popularity of the concept of the mainstream? Perhaps we still think about art in terms of “new market rules” which were first introduced in 1989 and discussed by critics in the late 1990s and the early 2000s? Can we think about the mainstream in terms of the canon? Or is it an opinion-forming entity which resembles Czapliński’s media “center” but functions under a different name? I will try to answer these questions below.

Firstly, in the 2000s, and both Dunin’s and Czapliński’s texts were written in the 2000s, we witnessed another shift in socio-cultural meanings previously associated with and governed by the canon and the center: the digital media revolution relegated twentieth-century mass media (such as magazines, radio, TV) to second place.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, we noticed the simultaneous homogenization and massification in the sender-receiver communication model in literature. From the perspective of the critical literary debate discussed in this article, the changes brought about by the digital revolution, to refer to Manuel Castells’ notion of network society, involved fundamental decentralization and de-hierarchization of the entire structure of sending and receiving information. This new communication model was essentially “flat” and limitless. From our point of view, this rendered defining what we call literature or art increasingly difficult. Castells’ information network has replaced Max Weber’s pyramid-like hierarchical communication model of bureaucratic institutions.<sup>21</sup> While it may sound banal, this new “network” approach to social communication, including literary criticism, essentially allows us to transcribe Czapliński’s notion of the media center into a new mainstream context. In contemporary criticism, it seems, the mainstream is defined in a fairly simple way, even if it is sometimes metaphorized by critics. The mainstream is both a center and a tool for

<sup>17</sup>*Literatura polska 1989–2009: przewodnik* [Guide to Polish literature 1989–2009], ed. Piotr Marecki (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010); *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Podręcznik*, ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, Jan Sowa (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015); *Literatura polska po 1989 w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Raport z badań*, ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz et al. (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015).

<sup>18</sup>*Polityka literatury. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, edited collection (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009).

<sup>19</sup>Dunin, 58.

<sup>20</sup>Bogusława Bodzioch-Bryła, “Nowe media wobec jednostki i społeczeństwa” [Individual, society and the new media], in: Bogusława Bodzioch-Bryła et al., *Przepływy, protezy, przedłużenia...: przemiany kultury polskiej pod wpływem nowych mediów po 1989 roku* [Flows, prostheses, extensions ...: new media and the changes in Polish culture after 1989] (Kraków: Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie, Wyd. WAM, 2015), 33–34.

<sup>21</sup>Anthony Elliott, *Contemporary Social Theory: Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 290.

exercising pure influence; like the information network, it does not require any permanent value-creating point of reference, be it in the form of a canon or an authority, to function. In the network model of social communication, the concepts of the canon and the center lose their meanings – and not because the center, the foundation for the public debate, is seized or “controlled” by the caste holding political power. Przemysław Czapliński discussed such scenarios in *Powrót centrali* and, more recently, in an online debate on new concepts of literary criticism organized by the Laboratory of Contemporary Critical Forms in Wrocław.<sup>22</sup> An opinion-forming and value-creating center which could be “controlled” by a political group only exists in Max Weber’s twentieth-century model of social communication with its hierarchy of community values and bureaucratic institutions (or, as Max Weber put it, “the iron cage of bureaucracy”). In the “network society,” the communication model is de-hierarchized and fragmented, divided into (physically) separate, yet deliberate and sequential, programmable identities.<sup>23</sup> If we apply this organizational principle to the exchange of information and cultural goods in mass communication in the network society, it will turn out that sending, receiving, the message, and the code all undergo homogenization.<sup>24</sup> In the network model, anyone can be a sender and anyone can be a receiver and everyone becomes exchangeable information, and thus a commodity and an artistic performance, at least in theory based on unique codes. However, contrary to what Castells argued, in the network society, the notion of the center does not entirely disappear. The center may and does manifest itself everywhere: as a momentary success that immediately turns into a failure. The mainstream does not provide a point of reference for critical evaluation; as in the case of the center, the point of reference is the exchange, which is a value in itself. However, the changes within the mainstream and the margins are not as predictable as in the case of the popular and the avantgarde – as seen in Czapliński’s more stable concept of the center that relies on 20th-century media. In the critical perspective I propose, I read such dynamic exchanges in the “network” communication model in and through the telling act of “running away from the center.” After all, the center always implies immobilization and “canonization” which could put an end to the exchange of values, which, from the point of view of the liberal cultural market, is not desired.

The concept of the mainstream has been used and defined in a number of ways in literary criticism. It is not a stable aesthetic and ideological category. However, it is almost universally assessed in terms of something undesirable and negative. Usually, in literary criticism, the “mainstream” functions as a synecdoche for imaginary unauthorized violence and as such it challenges criticism, which once occupied the position of an authority on the literary scene. Today, literary criticism, in all its more and less professional forms, is deliberately located in the marginal space.

<sup>22</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, *Pojęcia krytyczne i krytyka pojęć literackich* [Critical concepts and the criticism of literary concepts] (panel discussion, unauthorized statement), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBeKx7WCAAd5ecuDmokLTdg> (date of access: 23 Feb. 2022).

<sup>23</sup>Manuel Castells, *The network society* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2005), 410-411.

<sup>24</sup>I deliberately do not take into account the context which in the perspective of network communication ceases to represent what is heteronomous in the act of communication; if I did, in our new model of literary criticism, we would have to take into account factors which were absorbed into the mainstream mechanisms of continuous exchange of all values. One could even say that Castells’ network society, because it is an endless network, makes it impossible to evaluate anything in terms applicable for autonomous and heteronomous communication models. A very good example of this has been discussed during the panel discussion *O niezgodzie w literaturze* [On resistance in literature] at the 24th Stacji Literatura [Literature Station] in Stronie, which I describe below.

The critic usually wants to reside on the redefined, forever moving margins, which, especially in the era of the mass media, are synonymous with independence. Thus, what is unique for new critical discourses is that they either move away from the mainstream or that they remove this concept outside the scope of their field; as a result, as I have said at the beginning, broadly understood literary criticism cannot treat “the mainstream” as its point of reference and only refers to it occasionally, usually situating it in opposition to its “marginality.” The mainstream as such does not need to be strictly defined; it is whatever literary criticism currently needs to oppose. As a result, the mainstream’s purely operational understanding holds virtually no stable meanings; the mainstream is conceptually reduced to an act of abusing power. In the next section, I will try to show how contemporary literary critics define the mainstream.

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In an essay which summarized the 25th *Stacja Literatura* [Literature Station], entitled “W stronę mainstreamu” [Towards the mainstream], Weronika Janeczko, a critic who cherishes the more avant-garde past of the *Biuro Literackie* publishing house, expresses some concerns about its current publishing policy. The jubilee goal of *Biuro Literackie* in 2020 (the publishing house celebrated 25 years of history and growth) was not only to publish Polish poetry but also “to turn towards the mainstream, and so far, at least explicitly (perhaps with some exceptions, including Kora’s or Ciechowski’s books), *Biuro Literackie* did not tolerate the mainstream.”<sup>25</sup> According to Janeczko, this “turn towards the mainstream” was marked by the publication of novels, almanacs, and commemorative poetry collections by iconic foreign authors, Bronka Nowicka’s mainstream poetic prose, and two books of poems by Joanna Roszak and Katarzyna Szweda, described by the critic as “conventional.” The fact that the mainstream often functions as an undefined concept becomes clearly visible at this point, which, however, only raises further questions. Did Janeczko objectively discuss *Biuro Literackie*’s “love affair” with the mainstream? After all, the publishing house simply published books that could potentially be sold at the Polish bookstore chain *Empik*. Or perhaps *Biuro Literackie* simply entered into a dialogue with literary tradition, trying to co-build a new canon of modern poetry by occasionally publishing selections of poetry by Karpowicz, Różewicz and Wojacek? Or maybe there is something wrong with the way Janeczko defines the mainstream? After all, in my understanding, *Biuro Literackie*’s “turn towards the mainstream” simply involves popularizing culture. Is Janeczko right to criticize authors who employ a slightly more conventional form of modernist aesthetics but modernist nonetheless? Or, perhaps, *Biuro Literackie*’s jubilee picks are at odds with how the mainstream works? Is it simply impossible to define the mainstream, since it is so difficult to determine what can or cannot be classified as such? It is not surprising that the publisher of Polish poetry is trying to appeal to the mainstream reader. As for Janeczko, she simply uses only one of the possible intuitive definitions commonly associated with our new fragmented and “networked” center. Before I summarize how other critics define the mainstream, however, let me first address the abovementioned question of “running away” from the mainstream. The guests of the festival in *Stronie* in 2019 experienced it firsthand. At this point, let me recount an anecdote.

<sup>25</sup>Weronika Janeczko, “W stronę mainstreamu” [Towards the mainstream] (2021), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/w-strone-mainstreamu-1/> (date of access: 16 Nov. 2021).

The motto of a poetry panel on “resistance” organized at the 24th Stacja Literatura was “Suffer not,” a quote from Patti Smith’s “Radio Baghdad.” Three poets, a translator, and a book publisher discussed different, at times conflicting, roles and functions of literature. The entire literary scene and all forms of resistance were taken into consideration, including, for example, the enforcement of copyrights by publishing houses, an action which Czapliński once associated with the center.<sup>26</sup> One of the panellists, Filip Łobodziński, told his story of active resistance and transforming social reality: he recounted a media scandal in which he was involved. An anonymous internet user criticized his translation of Bob Dylan’s lyrics on *onet.muzyka*. She posted many unfavourable remarks and, according to Łobodziński, she also lied: “she said that my friends and family were responsible for the best translations in the book *Duszny kraj* [an anthology of translations of Dylan’s lyrics].”<sup>27</sup> This particular case, which Łobodziński discussed in response to Magdalena Rigamonti’s question, who chaired the panel, was resolved in a court of law. The court ordered for the IP address of the computer which the anonymous internet user used to be disclosed. The woman was found guilty of libel and sentenced to a fine, as reported in the Polish daily newspaper “Dziennik. Gazeta Prawna.” Łobodziński, who agreed with Rigamonti’s suggestion, told this story to show that he, as a writer, would “suffer not” cyberlibel committed by anonymous internet users. It should be added that in this case it was a court of law, and not a literary institution *per se*, that reacted. This reaction was directed against internet fora and the fact that they spread misinformation, hatred, and lies, often without legal consequences. Thanks to a Weberian institution, Łobodziński could make this dispute over the translation of Dylan’s lyrics “real.” Acting beyond the “network,” he shocked the decentralized center, which posulated that every author was inevitably within the immediate reach of the reader. I will not comment further on the effects of this, undoubtedly, fascinating interaction, both in political and sociological terms. I am instead interested in the unexpected act of “trading places” – roles and functions – between the powerful center and the subordinated margin, with its language of contention. The margin, namely the reader, comes up with a libelous story about a book of translations by a “mainstream” writer, translator, and journalist and poses a threat to this writer because it, too, functions as an opinion-forming, albeit unwarranted, authority. Interestingly, the focus is not on fiction writing and literary techniques, which is usually the subject of heated online debates, but on the writer’s intellectual property, which may only be defended in a court of law. This particular literary debate is about the truth about whether Łobodziński did translate all the lyrics himself or not, and not literature *per se*; respectively, the values associated with such a dispute by its participants, the writer and the reader, are not rooted in literature, although the conflict itself, which concerns the quality of the said translations, may be considered “literary.” For Łobodziński, this deformed communication situation in the network society (in this case concerning a quasi-literary debate) – neither real nor unreal, decentralized and boundless – and revolving around self-proclaimed authorities who base their judgments on their own opinions, personally hurt

<sup>26</sup>Beata Stasińska was one of the panelists. She was an extremely influential publisher at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. She is currently partner at the Foksal Publishing Group. She is also one of the three founding editors of the famous WAB publishing house.

<sup>27</sup>Filip Łobodziński, “O niezgodzie w literaturze” [On resistance in literature] ([2020] panel discussion, unauthorized statement), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/nagrania/o-niezgodzie-literaturze/> (date of access: 16 Nov. 2021).

him and he chose to use pure power and the law to reach the fluid core of the networked center. At the same time, Łobodziński discussed his experiences at a panel which celebrated resistance to the soulless, the normative, and the systemic, reminiscent of Weber's "iron cage of bureaucracy," using language which corresponded to non-institutionalized forms of resistance to such power.

I specifically refer to such a striking example of a dynamic transformation of concepts that organize and hierarchize social reality into networked concepts-entities operating in the non-hierarchical communication model. The concept of the mainstream is used in a much more stable manner in literary criticism; literary criticism is, after all, academic and objective, and the mainstream is usually defined and described with greater specificity. In academic texts, the mainstream does not openly or unequivocally function as a negative category. Nevertheless, different critics define the mainstream in different ways, and it often seems that taking a "mainstream" position is not commendable. Indeed, let us take a look at Dorota Kozicka's and Inga Iwasiów's texts. Differ as they may in terms of intention, style, and date of publication, similarly to Janeczko's essay, both books refer to a broad understanding of the mainstream. In Kozicka's book *Krytyczne (nie)porządki* [Critical (dis)order], published in 2013, the mainstream functions in a twofold manner. We read about "mainstream, journalistic criticism, and criticism practiced in fringe literary magazines"<sup>28</sup> and "the mainstream media."<sup>29</sup> Respectively, Kozicka writes about "masters, guardians of the truth and beneficiaries of the literary mainstream"<sup>30</sup> and "projects of literary feminist criticism rewritten by a mainstream critic" (Kozicka refers to Czapliński<sup>31</sup>). In *Odmrażanie* [Defrosting], a book from 2020 with a more self-reflective and artistic rather than metacritical or critical character, Iwasiów refers to the mainstream a number of times. She writes, for example, about "biopolitical mechanisms implemented into the intellectual mainstream thanks to Michel Foucault's books" – "which are no longer fashionable after the turn to the non-anthropocentric humanities;"<sup>32</sup> biographies written "between the mainstream culture and the academic margin," which feature "either indiscretions or meticulous footnotes;"<sup>33</sup> and "the limits imposed on women writers in Poland, the requirements of the shallow market, and censorship imposed by critical habits and mainstream tastes."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Dorota Kozicka, *Krytyczne (nie)porządki* [Critical (dis)order] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 130.

<sup>29</sup>Kozicka, 161.

<sup>30</sup>Regarding modern classics. Kozicka, 152.

<sup>31</sup>Kozicka, 210.

<sup>32</sup>Inga Iwasiów, *Odmrażanie. Literatura w potrzebie* [Defrosting: Literature in need] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2020), 8.

<sup>33</sup>Iwasiów, *Odmrażanie*, 173.

<sup>34</sup>Iwasiów, *Odmrażanie*, 194. Of course, not all critical texts employ such varied approaches to the "mainstream." In Paweł Kaczmarek's *Wysoka łączliwość* [High Connectivity], the "mainstream" is consistently defined as a popular media discourse (socio-cultural press, television, digital editions of literary magazines addressed to the general public) which slowly consumes critical debate. Professional criticism and popular criticism give rise to "middle-brow criticism," which responds to the media demand. Kaczmarek is consistent in his argumentation, allowing us to conclude that the mainstream is something negative, undesirable. For Kaczmarek, Andrzej Franaszek is such a "mainstream" critic and what the mainstream (i.e. capitalist and liberal) media, which (occasionally) discuss poetry, want might be described as follows: "«How did Franaszek become perhaps the most important mainstream literary critic?». If Franaszek's texts are genuinely interesting today, it is because his growing influence exposes the essentially defective nature of contemporary cultural life in Poland. He is the Balcerowicz or Korwin-Mikke of Polish criticism – lots of common sense, strong views and a lot of energy invested into the creation of his public persona." Paweł Kaczmarek, *Wysoka łączliwość* [High Connectivity] (Wrocław: Fundacja im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019), 211.

Let us also take a look at shorter critical texts associated with specific literary events. I shall discuss poetry criticism, referring to numerous reviews, answers to questionnaires, and discussions that may be found on Biuro Literackie's website. The term mainstream is employed there in all kinds of contexts, many of them negative. Regardless of what the mainstream represents, one thing is clear: firstly, the mainstream is no good, and secondly, no critic would ever define themselves as "mainstream," regardless of their affiliation and the meanings with which the mainstream is occasionally associated. In response to Biuro Literackie's 2016 questionnaire *Nowy (polski) głos w Europie* [The New (Polish) voice in Europe], Karol Maliszewski talked about Mirka Szychowiak and Krzysztof Bieleń in the wider critical context of underrated/overrated authors: "They both belong to my world, the hierarchy of values I have built for 30 years, because they are so perfectly invisible to the mainstream, so true to themselves, and at the same time they are open to people who read differently, who read next to them."<sup>35</sup> In 2020, commenting on the books published by Biuro Literackie that year (and, apparently, adopting a different perspective than Janeczko), the critic thus described Katarzyna Szweda's *Bosorka*:

So, at first, we find it surprising that such poetry may exist in this day and age and that it has been accepted and not banished as a provincial literary movement – a charming folklore-like curiosity. Something must have happened to the way in which we read literature; after all, the mainstream appreciated and honored this post-Lemko novel; it was considered noteworthy, maybe even equal to Dyciu's [Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki – JO] post-Ukrainian novel. First of all, we witness gender mainstreaming, that is, including gender issues in mainstream politics, by all means: affirmative action (also known as "positive discrimination") or compensatory measures.<sup>36</sup>

For Karol Maliszewski, the mainstream comprises academic criticism, literary awards, literary criticism, and, last but not least, the opinion-forming media – and his findings, as a "marginal" critic, are interesting insofar as he undoubtedly is a part of all these (poetic) mainstream dimensions, and his voice is recognized there. For Kacper Bartczak, who participated in the *Nowe języki poezji* [New Languages of Poetry] debate, also organized by Biuro Literackie, the mainstream is only the media, although Karolina Felberg, whom he praises below, is an academic critic:

When some years later Karolina Felberg discussed Rae Armantrout's *Dark Matter* in "Tygodnik Kulturalny" [Cultural News] on TVP Kultura, her knowledge and great understanding of Armantrout's innovative poems clashed with the incoherent stutter of other guests who were only able to talk about this clear poetry in terms of how difficult it was and how it broke down language. And this was not original. Unoriginally, almost predictably, the mainstream cannot interact with contemporary poetry which does not make anything easier by employing the confessional mode and instead constantly takes formal, intellectual, political and conceptual risks. The power of such poetry is still off the media radar.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Karol Maliszewski, "Konrad Góra, którego najmocniej czuję" [Konrad Góra, whom I feel the most] (2016), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/konrad-gora/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

<sup>36</sup>Karol Maliszewski, "Zamykam oczy, otwieram oczy" [I close my eyes, I open my eyes] (2021), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/zamykam-oczy-otwieram-oczy/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

<sup>37</sup>Kacper Bartczak, "Język jest grą. Planszówka bez planszy" [Language is a game. A board game without a board] (2020), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/jezyk-jest-gra-planszowka-bez-planszy/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

As an academic critic and poet, Bartczak strongly emphasizes his marginal position in relation to the mainstream tools of popularizing culture; however, he still holds on to his power as an opinion-forming authority. It should be said that our understanding of the mainstream is further challenged when we analyze how poets speak about poetry in public debates, which does not take place often these days. Although Dawid Mateusz, Bartczak's co-panelist, does not use the word mainstream, we know exactly what he means when he talks about exerting influence on the status of literature and the questionable actions of some authors:

I asked if [the poets, J.O.] would like to say something, and in response I got: it got boring / it no longer affects us / it is a waste of time and gets on your nerves / it is impossible to read it. And I am not surprised at all. I am also not surprised that they do not want to annoy the main players in the field (jurors, academic professors, important critics). But I've already seen too much, I know this field and the rules that govern it too well to take it seriously. Unfortunately, I can see quite clearly what is behind this game, who aspires to what, who supports whom and why, who will write a positive or a negative review for whom, but also, on the other hand, who works hard for award nominations, mainly through socializing, and also who desperately wants to get on some award boards.<sup>38</sup>

In Mateusz's essay, entitled *Damy wam tam, gdzie was nie ma* [We will give it to you where you are not], the mainstream are effectively networks established in the literary field, associated with hierarchies and traditions which date back to the 1990s. In this perspective, the "mainstream" represents the poetics of the generation gap, insofar as the older generation, the winners, are in control of awards, positive reviews and popularity contests in a manner which has virtually not changed since the times of the Polish People's Republic.

In *Kup pan książkę*, published in 2008, Krzysztof Uniłowski does not actually use the English term "mainstream;" instead he writes a lot about "główny nurt,"<sup>39</sup> describing its various incarnations.<sup>40</sup> Uniłowski argues that Polish criticism no longer follows "vertical" classifications (high-low, elite-popular) but instead is organized in horizontal terms (central-peripheral, mainstream-marginal). He emphasizes that the ideological premises of "literary modernism" were transformed into "an ideology which validates, or even glorifies, contemporary society and the free market, which effectively leads to the devaluation of literature's critical functions."<sup>41</sup> Uniłowski also shows how confusing the mainstream, as a concept, is, because the old hierarchical system of values and the new market system of values, in which the author competes for the reader's attention, overlap. The critic analyzes Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało's review of Drotkiewicz's novel *Paris London Dachau*, published by the Lampa i Iskra Boża publishing house, which Wolny-Hamkało described as kitschy and criticized the publishing house for lowering its standards. According to Uniłowski, Wolny-Hamkało criticized the publishing house from an elitist perspective – she presented it as a mainstream (popular)

<sup>38</sup>Dawid Mateusz, "Damy wam tam, gdzie was nie ma" [We will give it to you where you are not] (2020), <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/damy-wam-tam-gdzie-was-nie-ma/> (date of access: 17 Nov. 2021).

<sup>39</sup>"Główny nurt" may be translated into English as "the mainstream" (translator's note).

<sup>40</sup>The first edition of the article, to which I will refer, was published in 2005 in the book *Kanon i obrzeża*, which I mentioned at the beginning of my essay.

<sup>41</sup>Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 208.

entity and contrasted this new-found popularity with the publishing house's niche, artistic, and avant-garde history:

[...] the publication of Drotkiewicz's novel is not only a betrayal of the highest artistic ideals, but also destroys the literary scene. [...] Indeed, the applied criteria appear confusing: the reviewer refers to modernist elitism but only for the greater good of ... civil society. Her review appeared in an alternative medium (at least it appears to be alternative), namely on the Internet, on the Polish Radio's webpage. However, the Polish Radio, as an institution, is more influential and significant for mass communication than a newly founded literary magazine, but it is the latter that appears to be a breeding ground for populism and kitsch, while the website of the Polish Radio goes against the popular and the kitschy and defends "high" culture endangered (by the young). The young poet and reviewer Wolny-Hamkało criticizes Dunin-Wąsowicz for betraying the "niche," but at the same time she employs the logic used by mainstream critics.<sup>42</sup>

Uniłowski shows that contemporary evaluation criteria are somewhat incoherent, insofar as to defend the interests of the literature of the center, whose status is unquestionable, criticism employs the language of resistance to the centralized. I have also tried to show this earlier in my text. And Uniłowski, in a way, personally witnessed that "the mainstream and the margins may unexpectedly trade places" when Monika Świerkosz accused him of criticizing "middlebrow fiction" from an elitist perspective. Świerkosz accused the critic of conservatism, drawing parallels between his position and the dominant and traditional opinion-forming cultural center, once supported by the authority of the academy – without questioning whether such a position may today, objectively, be adopted by (after all) marginalized literary criticism. Świerkosz, who will be the last critic I shall discuss in the present article, reevaluates the positions held by the margins and the canon, which she identifies with the mainstream, from the perspective of feminist criticism. She discusses the reception of Olga Tokarczuk's works, as it moved from the margins to the mainstream. Her perspective, which is to some extent consistent with the critical rhetoric of the 1990s, is as follows:

I think of Tokarczuk's initial marginality as a writer in the sense in which "femininity" ("menstruation"), provincialism, and popularity ascribed to her texts are considered in our culture, and in the canon, to be the opposites of "masculinity," universality, elitism – genuine artistic values. This gradual, but not easy, transition of Tokarczuk's works to the literary mainstream is confirmed by the numerous and telling changes of her publishers.<sup>43</sup>

Świerkosz redefines the concept of "middlebrow prose" by referring to a "male-centered" canon of literary tradition, which Uniłowski, as an academic, supposedly defends, thus admitting that, in fact, Tokarczuk is in a win-win situation. The new center is based on both popularity and engagement; it builds new paradigms of resistance towards the "male-centered" world from the perspective of, firstly, creativity, and secondly, ethical change. And "making the world a better place" constitutes today the very essence of the mainstream. It is not my

<sup>42</sup>Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 210.

<sup>43</sup>Monika Świerkosz, "«Czystej między niewiastami» droga do kanonu" [«Pure among women» moves to the canon], in eadem: *W przestrzeniach tradycji. Proza Izabeli Filipiak i Olgi Tokarczuk* [In the spaces of tradition. Izabela Filipiak's and Olga Tokarczuk's prose] (Warsaw: IBL, 2015), 156.

intention to enter into the debate on Tokarczuk's prose; I only point to the fact that if the center manifests its "marginality," combining potential for social change and social criticism with formulism, which makes massification possible, we operate in a non-critical, counterfactual, space. In such a space, it is no longer possible to evaluate both literature and criticism without contradictions. In Świerkosz's opinion, the strength of Uniłowski's elitism lies in his elite marginality, but this does not mean that this discourse controls the language and the logic of the margins. It seems that academia, a former center that today is synonymous with immobilizing meanings, is losing in the critical literary debate – as a central margin, it is bound to fail. And the potential of the real center, the mainstream, is the margins' prongness to change, refusal to follow the rules. This does not necessarily have to have anything to do with the findings of the critic who chooses to position himself outside the mainstream. The elitism of the avant-garde, the elegant ghetto of intellectuals – such critical contexts of the debate on the center and the margins after 1989 are simply unthinkable in the network society. Online literary debates on various fan fora clearly show that direct communication between authors and readers, usually in the form of direct and quick exchanges, is formative in the creation of values. Educated middlemen are not needed. However, critical debates are always inscribed in a communicative model associated with the act of forcing cultural phenomena into the mainstream (which is both desired and abhorred). This model could also be part of the transactional space. Although being in the center is desired, it is also associated with the accepted, the sacred, and the canonical – soon, whatever is in the center will become conservative and thus obsolete. Understandably, such a negative view of the mainstream poses a threat to any authority.

Over a relatively short period of time, the nature of the opposition between the center and the margins had changed many times, giving rise to even more chaotic and deformed critical criteria, especially in the network model of communication about literature. Contemporary critics struggle to define and understand the "mainstream" because, as Uniłowski suggested, we live in strange times – the times in which the old and the new critical criteria overlap. This confusion, which ten years ago frustrated literary criticism, in the 1990s had been often associated, in positive terms, with freedom, with the blurring of distinctions between high art and popular art which gives rise to one egalitarian postmodern culture. While I argue that the concept of the mainstream in network society is incomparable with the "center," which is associated with institutionalized literary debates and old hierarchical systems, one thing remains unchanged when it comes to the new Polish literary scene. Aleš Erjavec, an art historian who studies avant-garde and political changes which have been taking place in the Soviet Union's satellite countries since the 1980s, has identified a common feature of "post-socialist" postmodernism. Unusual in the eyes of Western modernism, it is art's power to provoke social change. This belief in art's power has been shaped, in equal measure, by Marxist criticism and Romanticism.<sup>44</sup> According to Erjavec, the belief that artists may "change the world for the better" is what makes modernism and postmodernism in the former USSR satellite countries special.

<sup>44</sup>Aleš Erjavec, "Introduction", in: *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (London: University of California Press, 2003), 24–25.

In Poland, the “mainstream” could also be defined as a set of dominant artistic styles and beliefs, similarly to the English-language dictionary definition. The mainstream is “the culture of the center” that we would define as universal, insofar as it is accepted by most people (cf. *Cambridge Dictionary*). The concept of the “mainstream” was used in the United States as early as in the 1950s; we can speak not only of the mainstream media, mainstream republican politics, but also mainstream Hollywood movies. Certainly, the concept of the mainstream, like all concepts in the late modern world, is prone to, at times, drastic changes; we know that the mainstream absorbs values from the margins (whatever their definition may be), that it is receptive and that it imitates everything that it may benefit from. Nobody expects the mainstream to be “deep,” to offer interesting readings and fair judgments. However, even though the mainstream is thriving in Poland, the post-socialist context is bound to make things interesting. This concept remains anachronistically elitist in Poland. On the one hand, like the old communist-modernist “center,” it is “serious” and occupies a high position in the artistic hierarchy. On the other hand, it plays the role of a (relatively and digitally popularized) post-culture, which ensures its universality. The Polish mainstream, an entity that is not entirely critical, literary, publishing, journalistic, nor academic, has inherited from its two very different ancestors a unique aura of intellectualism. On the one hand, there is nothing wrong with it; on the other hand, it is problematic – because we want to zoom in on the mainstream. And yet, whenever one wants to touch or control the mainstream, it moves, as if it did not exist – and occasionally it even becomes us. Those who bask in mainstream waters think they operate in the margins and offer their (hard?) work as proof. Beyond the margins, more and more ruthless policies flourish. Marginal fighters on all sides, with effects adjusted to the actual power of their messages, try to be different from one another and yet they compete for the same mainstream position, which they will, at least ostensibly, want to abandon immediately.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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# KEYWORDS

## CANON

*opinion-forming center*

## THE MAINSTREAM

**ABSTRACT:**

This article discusses the concept of the “mainstream” in relation to the old concepts of the canon and the opinion-forming center, as terms which have gradually replaced the more traditional and institutionally justified premises of literary criticism in the public debate. The changes in the meaning of the “literary canon,” inspired by the new pragmatic cultural market and the political transformation in Poland after 1989, have already been discussed in the last twenty years. The concept of the “mainstream” is often treated in literary criticism as a substitute. This article aims to show the difference between the abovementioned terms and the “mainstream,” which may be considered an entity to a greater extent dependent on the network model of communication in a society influenced by factors which shape culture on a “global” basis.

## NETWORK SOCIETY

### *literary criticism*

#### *literary criticism in digital media*

#### MEDIA DEBATES ON LITERATURE

##### **NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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