

The Concept of a Commodity in Polish Literary Criticism After 1989

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The book, apart from its internal values, is also a commodity, but a very special commodity [1948].¹

At this point, we touch upon a delicate issue, whether the book is simply a commodity like any other or whether it is special. It is debatable [...] [1991].²

A commodity like any other

Apart from the questions connected to the plot, the reviewers of Maciej Płaza's novel *Robinson w Bolechowie* [Robinson in Bolechów] repeatedly addressed two other interconnected issues. The first issue concerned the sophisticated style inspired by the tradition of modernist prose, filled with ekphrastic descriptions of Andrew Wyeth's paintings or hidden references to Czesław Miłosz's, Bolesław Leśmian's and William Butler Yeats's poems. The second issue, respectively, concerned the goal of such an elaborate stylization. According to Maciej Duda, this question divided the critics into two distinct camps: the camp of influencers and the camp of academics.³ For example, Wojciech Szot, the then co-author of the Kurzojady blog, stated at the end of his review of the book, which was otherwise favorable, that:

¹ *Jak sprzedać książkę? Poradnik dla sprzedawcy* [How to sell a book? A guide for the seller] (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1948), 3, <https://polona.pl/item/jak-sprzedac-ksiazke-poradnik-dla-sprzedawcy,MTEExNjM1MjM4/>.

² „Człowiek na kryzys. Z Grzegorzem Bogutą, dyrektorem Państwowego Wydawnictwa Naukowego, rozmawiała Danuta Zagrodzka” [A man that could handle a crisis: Danuta Zagrodzka interviews Grzegorz Boguta, director of the Polish Academic Publishing House], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 13, 1991.

³ Maciej Duda, „Robinson” [Robinson], *Czas Kultury* (a biweekly), January 23, 2018, <https://czaskultury.pl/czytanki/robinson/>.

It was as if someone had sprinkled glitter on this wonderful work, albeit patchily. All these sentences on the page, lists, literary references, stylizations and literary games are aimed at fierce critics rather than readers. One could easily fall for it, but I am skeptical.⁴

Szot does not state it directly, but he implies that *Robinson* is a work subordinated to the logic of a commodity: created in response to market demands, however niche it may be. However, the blogger does not criticize it *per se*. The only problem is that Płaza supposedly writes with fierce critics in mind, i.e., he focuses on a different consumer group than the people who read the Kurzojady blog (the apparently transparent mention of “readers” most likely refers to the readers of the blog). Interestingly, a similar conceptual construction may be found in Dariusz Nowacki’s enthusiastic review (and Duda would argue that Nowacki is an academic critic):

Undoubtedly, Maciej Płaza writes for those who can still concentrate, for connoisseurs, for those who savor reading. And above all, for those who are still able to distinguish between *belles lettres* and commercial literature, the art of the word and the book market.⁵

Nowacki, unlike Szot, clearly identifies with the educated middle-class connoisseurs who still “can” recognize true literature and he is pleased that someone wrote a novel with their needs in mind. However, he falsely believes that today “writing for connoisseurs” is not commercial, that terms such as “high literature” and “popular literature” are but labels which point to different market segments. The alleged “class rift”⁶ between academic criticism (focused on form, style) and influencer criticism (focused on the plot) which Duda introduces in his review of *Robinson*, disappears when we realize that both Nowacki and Szot share a vision of literary production which involves commodities like any other. According to this worldview, the novel (its style, form, plot, etc.) is determined by the author’s presumptions about the tastes and needs of various consumers, i.e., people whom the author recognizes to be potential buyers of a given commodity. The author does not even care about what they will do with it after the purchase.⁷

What we could see in Szot’s and Nowacki’s reviews, the American literary scholar Nicholas Brown calls a manifestation of the dominant aesthetic ideology of late capitalist societies. It may be

⁴ Wojciech Szot, „Maciej Płaza, «Robinson w Bolechowie»” [Maciej Płaza, «Robinson in Bolechów»], *Zdaniem Szota*, December 11, 2017, <https://zdaniem.szota.pl/1070-maciej-plaza-robinson-w-bolechowie>.

⁵ Dariusz Nowacki, „«Robinson w Bolechowie» Macieja Płazy: powieść dla tych, którzy potrafią odróżnić literaturę piękną od produkcji książkowej” [Maciej Płaza’s «Robinson in Bolechów»: A novel for those who can tell *belles lettres* and commercial literature apart], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 3, 2018, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,22847981,robinson-w-bolechowie-macieja-plazy-powiec-dla-tych-ktorzy.html>.

⁶ Duda, “Robinson”. I drew on Duda in my review of Płaza’s novel, see: Łukasz Żurek, “Drugi modernizm” [Second modernism], *Dwutygodnik*, February 2018, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/7643-drugi-modernizm.html>.

⁷ “His commodity possesses for himself no immediate use-value. Otherwise, he would not bring it to the market. It has use-value for others; but for himself its only direct use-value is that of being a depository of exchange-value, and, consequently, a means of exchange. Therefore, he makes up his mind to part with it for commodities whose value in use is of service to him. All commodities are non-use-values for their owners, and use-values for their non-owners.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, Volume I, *Book One: The Process of Production of Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2015), 60. After one of the reviewers of *Capital*, David Harvey, I argue that Marx in his most important work tried to describe the internal logic and dynamics of capitalism as a whole, and not one of its historical forms. In other words, although the 20th and the 21st centuries abound in technologies and goods which Marx did not know, it does not change the fact that the dialectic of exchange-value and use-value shapes the commodity form even today.

identified both in the mass media and in the contemporary humanities.⁸ In one of his most recent articles, Brown characterizes this ideology in such a way as to indicate its connection with the commodity form in its developed form, which involves the entire spectrum of social relations:

Contemporary aesthetic ideology, correctly grasping that commodity exchange is the mode in which things come to count as socially existing in capitalist societies even when they do not circulate immediately as commodities, insists that artworks are not only commodities, but commodities like any other.⁹

Brown states that a contemporary work of art, e.g., literature, in principle is also a commodity, that it functions or may begin to function on the market in a similar way to other goods (we buy them for a certain amount of money for which we may also buy other products etc.). Brown is interested in whether we can find any inalienable (irreducible to differences in points of view, opinions, etc.) ontological difference between a work of art and other products circulating on the market. What he finds problematic, however, is the fact that many would gladly remove the word “also” from “a work of art is also a commodity.”

Brown’s book *Autonomy. The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* attempts to give a positive answer to this question.¹⁰ However, taking Brown’s observations as my starting point, I would like to focus on precisely what Brown reflects negatively on. I am interested in outlining the history of how the foundations of an aesthetic ideology, according to which a literary work is thought of as “a product subject, above all, to market and marketing rules in favor of the heteronomy of the field,”¹¹ developed in Polish culture and Polish literary criticism. The systemic transformations of the 1990s, and especially those that directly affected the literary field, such as the collapse of state patronage and the rise of private publishing houses,¹² effectively resulted in the capitalist commodity form influencing not only literature but also concepts used in literary criticism and literary studies. Even though, as Joanna Orska wrote, Jan Błoński’s famous

⁸ I am merely signaling Brown’s criticism of various theoretical discourses insofar as they blur the ontological difference between a work of art (an object having an immanent meaning identical with authorial intent) and a commodity (an object with a socially determined use value and any number of possible uses), because the exhaustive reconstruction of this discussion goes beyond the issues discussed in this article. A convincing criticism of one of them, the so-called new materialism, may be found in Paweł Kaczmarski’s essay; see: Paweł Kaczmarski, “Materialism As Intentionalism: on the Possibility of a «New Materialist» Literary Criticism”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 34, 4 (2019), <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/prt/article/view/21971>.

⁹ Nicholas Brown, “Late postmodernism”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, 3 (2020): 9.

¹⁰ See: Nicholas Brown, “Introduction. On Art and Commodity Form”, in: *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 1–39. Brown’s theses are summarized in the polemics with Dawid Kujawa, emphasizing their links with Walter Benn Michaels’ “strong intentionalism.” See: Łukasz Żurek, „Wiersz i gumowa kaczka. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [A poem and a rubber duck. In response to Dawid Kujawa], *Mały Format*, July 13, 2021, <http://malyformat.com/2021/07/wiersz-i-gumowa-kaczka-odpowiedz-dawidowi-kujawie/>.

¹¹ Piotr Marecki, Ewelina Sasin, “Geneza i rozwój pola literackiego w Polsce po 1989” [The genesis and development of the literary field in Poland after 1989], 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: a textbook] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015), 56. Sociological and literary research internalizing this perspective, with all its consequences, is conducted in Poland by Dominik Antonik, see: *Autor jako marka: literatura w kulturze audiowizualnej społeczeństwa informacyjnego* [The Author as a Brand: Literature in the Audiovisual Culture of Information Society] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014); “Przeciw autonomii: pisarze-celebrzy i próba rewizji illusio literatury” [Against Autonomy: Celebrity Writers and an Attempt to Revise Illusio Literature], in: *Filozofia filologii* [The Philosophy of Philology], ed. Łukasz Żurek et al. (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019), 286–309.

¹² In the early 2000s, an important role was played by “new actors in the field,” namely “marketing specialists, managing editors and literary agents,” who appeared on the book market “as the interest in the book as a product” declined and the need to “spend a lot of money on promoting each and every book” intensified. Marecki, Sasin, 54.

claim put forth in the title of one of his essays from the 1990s that “1989 is as important as 1918”¹³ does not, from the point of view of the history of literature, hold, similarities between the two historical moments, at least as regards the economic and political planes, still exist:

Literature ceased to be a propaganda tool and a form of epiphany and, just like before the war, it once again functioned as a market commodity.¹⁴

Back in the times of the Polish People’s Republic, the sociology of literature which limited the question of the commodity form only to its communication and distribution aspects could not prepare literature and literary criticism for the “ice-cold rules of competition.”¹⁵ For example: in the concluding remarks to his 1978 article entitled *Proces i aparat komunikacji literackiej* [The Process and Apparatus of Literary Communication], Janusz Lalewicz emphasized that material and economic factors, such as the fact that a work of art acquires certain features of a commodity in the process of its distribution, “[...] do not directly concern the text” and the author who addresses “conceptual” problems.¹⁶ According to this theory, the market’s influence on literature is limited to communication. It has no influence on the production of literature.

A similar problem may be found in Stefan Żółkiewski’s 1977 essay *Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej* [Ideas in the theory of literary production]. Żółkiewski distinguishes between “optimization norms” (or “normative dominants”) applicable in a given system of literary communication; they concern the author and the people involved in publishing, distributing, and selling books, etc. In the case of the author, these standards, Żółkiewski argues, are internal: “they concern the optimal organization of the text in accordance with its assumed functions.”¹⁷ In the case of the people involved in publishing, distributing, and selling books, they are external, because they concern “mitigating the risk of addressing wrong target readers, limited diffusion,” and as such they strengthen the effective strategies of “distributive success.”¹⁸ Already at the beginning of his essay, Żółkiewski notices that both types of norms are contradictory “regardless of variable historical conditions;” however, depending on different social forms of circulation of literature and different production models, “these contradictions may be greater or smaller.”¹⁹ In the socialist system, the “tensions between literary production and control,” according to Żółkiewski, were deepened by bureaucratization and preventive censorship but socialism “succeeded” in “[...] decoupling literature and culture in general.” On the other hand, in capitalist, but also

¹³Jan Błoński, „Rok 1989 jest równie ważny co 1918...” [1989 is as important as 1918], *NaGłos* 1 (1990).

¹⁴Joanna Orska, „O «lewicowej» strategii współczesnej krytyki literackiej wobec wolnego rynku mediów” [The „leftist” strategy of contemporary literary criticism as a response to the free media market], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku. Między rynkiem a uniwersytetem* [Critical discourses at the threshold of the 21st century. Between the market and the university], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 220.

¹⁵Orska, 20.

¹⁶Janusz Lalewicz, „Proces i aparat komunikacji literackiej” [The Process and Apparatus of Literary Communication], *Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja*, 37 (1978): 23. The extent to which Lalewicz’s approach to the issue of commodities was influenced by Robert Escarpit’s research, which was one of the Polish scholar’s main methodological inspirations (along with the works of Émile Benvenist and Jean-Paul Sartre), is another question.

¹⁷Stefan Żółkiewski, “Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej” [Ideas in the theory of literary production], in: *Kultura, socjologia, semiotyka literacka: studia* [Culture, sociology, literary semiotics: studies], works by the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1979), 475.

¹⁸Żółkiewski, „Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej”, 475.

¹⁹Żółkiewski, „Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej”, 475.

social-democratic, Sweden,²⁰ even a strong system of financial support for writers did not effectively respond to “the demands of the market [...] in terms of the dangerous commercialization of literature.” “In the capitalist system,” Żółkiewski writes “all good intentions have been defeated by the market and its laws.”²¹

Respectively, within the framework introduced by Żółkiewski, who distinguishes between the (antithetical) norms for “the author” and “the book dealer,” completely subordinating literary production to the logic of the market, as described, for example, by Theodor Adorno in his essay on the culture industry,²² would be unthinkable. It would not be possible, first of all, because Lalewicz’s and Żółkiewski’s theories were limited by the horizon of the social and economic conditions of the People’s Republic of Poland, insofar as their starting point was the commodity form in the socialist system and the problems posed by contemporary cultural policies.²³

However, while Żółkiewski and Lalewicz simply did not have to take into account the influence exerted by the commodity form on literature, critics in late capitalism, as exemplified by the heated discussion of *Robinson*, “overlooked” this aspect for different reasons. Therefore, we should actually investigate how the naturalization of the commodity form (as seen in the works of Warsaw sociologists of literature) and, more broadly, how different historical factors which provide context for criticism and literature functioned in the times of the new market “normal”²⁴. Instead of analyzing such manifestations of commodification of literature as middlebrow prose, bestsellers, or the blurred border between critical and advertising discourses,²⁵ I propose to focus on one aspect of the intricate history of the commodity, which is a complex term in and of itself, in Polish criticism after 1989. Obviously, the aim of this constellational story is not to provide

²⁰In the 1970s, trade unions were a force to be reckoned with in Sweden; they almost managed to implement one of the most ambitious economic plans in the history of the post-war left. See: Mio Tastas Viktorsson, Saoirse Gowan, “Revisiting the Meidner Plan”, *Jacobin Magazine*, 22 August 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/sweden-social-democracy-meidner-plan-capital>.

²¹Żółkiewski, „Pomysły do teorii produkcji literackiej”, 482–483.

²²Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry”, in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 94–136. It is hard to imagine that a Polish literary scholar who referred to Adorno’s theory of the culture industry in their sociological analysis of how literature functioned in the People’s Republic of Poland in the late 1970s would be accepted and understood. The problem was not the fact that many Polish humanists were not familiar with Adorno’s theory but the fact that it grew out of an analysis of the production relations prevailing in post-war capitalism, in the US and West Germany.

²³We must remember that Żółkiewski could not have imagined a situation in which the state would give up on its cultural policies, leaving writers and artists at the mercy of the market. As Żółkiewski wrote in 1981, “only a person who believes in a utopia can give up on state patronage [over culture] controlled by society.” Stefan Żółkiewski, *Cetno i licho: szkice 1938–1980* [A guessing game: sketches 1938–1980] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1983), 74.

²⁴On the metaphor of “the return to the normal” in the critical-literary discourse of the 1990s, see: Marta Koronkiewicz, “Żeby było normalnie. W jaki sposób początek opowieści o trzydziestoleciu literatury najnowszej wyznacza jej koniec” [Back to normal: How does the beginning of the story about thirty years of modern literature mark its end?], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 18, 2 (2021): 1–16.

²⁵See, among others, Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Cała prawda o «prozie środka». Cz. 1” [The whole truth about „middlebrow prose”. Part. 1], *Fa-Art* 3 (2002): 10–15; Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Cała prawda o «prozie środka». Cz. 2” [The whole truth about „middlebrow prose”. Part. 2], *Fa-Art* 4 (2002): 32–41; Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Cała prawda o «prozie środka». Cz. 3” [The whole truth about „middlebrow prose”. Part. 3], *Fa-Art* 1/2 (2003): 72–75; Bernadetta Darska, „Reklamować czy polecać. O towarze jakim jest literatura” [To advertise or recommend. About the commodity which is literature], in: *Dwadzieścia lat literatury polskiej: 1989–2009*, ed. Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski, vol. 1, part 2: *Życie literackie po roku 1989* [Literary life after 1989] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2011), 13–26; Przemysław Czaplinski, „Żwawy trup. Krytyka literacka 1989–2004” [A lively corpse: Literary Criticism 1989–2004], in: *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [Return of the center. Literature in the new reality] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo literackie, 2007), 87–133 (especially the sections *Masowe i medialne* [The mass and the media] and *Marketing i sieć* [Marketing and the net]).

the reader with a comprehensive description of the problem but to identify the general logic embedded in the reflection on the relationship between literature and the free market found in heterogeneous critical essays published in different decades.²⁶ Perhaps it will help us understand why both Szot and Nowacki believe that literature is a commodity like any other.

The “distrustful,” the “impatient,” and the “demanding”

On June 29, 1990, Izabella Cywińska’s column entitled *Rynek i wartości* [The Market and Values] was published in the popular daily newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza.” Cywińska was minister for culture and arts in Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s cabinet at the time. She characterized the state of culture as follows:

In the past years, culture’s heavy dependence on the economy has not been evident. Financed by the totalitarian state and to a large extent used as a propaganda tool, culture had a life of its own. It is difficult to accept that it is different now; one needs more than a few months to come to terms with this fact. Many artists lived in a kind of cocoon, believing in the inexhaustible possibilities of the state that censored and classified but paid.²⁷

Cywińska reproduces the view inherited from oppositional criticism, according to which, after March 1968, the authorities ordered writers (or more broadly: artists) not to speak up on political matters, offering them in return a margin of creative independence.²⁸ This is why she criticizes the fact that culture in the People’s Republic of Poland “had a life of its own” and praises “culture’s heavy dependence on the economy” in capitalism. Artists, who had not treated the “audience as their most important partner” and lived off state subsidies, now had to strive for “social acceptance,” “trying to understand their direct relationship with their audience and commit their future to them, for better or for worse.”²⁹ For Cywińska, then, anonymous recipients, the potential buyers of goods, who “should feel like the main patrons of the arts,”³⁰ are synonymous with the economy, since the neo-liberal state had given up on it, either to a large degree or completely. In closing, Cywińska quotes the Poznań sociologist Marian Golka:

[...] It is not a question of recognizing that art is only a commodity, it is a question of recognizing that art is also a commodity.³¹

²⁶My methodological inspiration is, of course, the project of critical constellations, focused on revealing “the conditions in which criticism operates [...] in the perspective of material entanglement of critical languages.” Dorota Kozicka, Monika Świerkosz, Katarzyna Trzeciak, „«Innowacyjne rozumienie». Konstelacyjne badania krytyki literackiej” [«Innovative Understanding». Constellation studies of literary criticism, in: *Konstelacje krytyczne* [Critical constellations], vol. 1: *Teorie i praktyki* [Theories and practices] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 13.

²⁷Izabella Cywińska, „Rynek i wartości” [The Market and Values], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 29, 1990, the digital archive of „Gazeta Wyborcza”.

²⁸As Tadeusz Komendant wrote in 1981, “the ‘call to action’ issued in March 1968, for ‘writers focus on writing,’ determined the fate of our culture for many years.” Tadeusz Komendant, “Zostaje kantyczka. Tekst wygłoszony na zjeździe poetów” [All that is left is *Canticum*: Lecture delivered at the congress of poets], in: *Zostaje kantyczka: eseje z pogranicza czasów* [All that is left is *Canticum* remains: essays from the borderland of time] (Warsaw: Oficyna Literacka, 1987), 11.

²⁹Cywińska.

³⁰Cywińska.

³¹Cywińska.

In the 1990s, Golka published several works in which he argued that the market best regulates relations in the field of art,³² but in the statement quoted by Cywińska, he did not say anything controversial. The problem is that, in accordance with the vision of culture under capitalism presented in *Rynek i wartości*, art, including literature, must be only a commodity.³³ The audience cannot act as “patrons of the arts” because they do not finance the creative process – they only voluntarily pay for the finished product, which, moreover, is created with them in mind: in the capitalist system “the most important partner” is the market.³⁴ Therefore, art must not so much conform to what Żółkiewski would call external optimization norms as pretend that no other norms exist.

Cywińska’s words unexpectedly reverberated in 1995 in Jerzy Sosnowski’s polemic with Grzegorz Musiała’s satirical story *Wielki bajer czyli o czerwonych plackach, pejczach i jeszcze trochę* [Humbug: Red cakes, whips and more]. Musiała’s story today reads primarily as a document of the era – it shows how the commodity form completely changed the accepted rules of literary life. In this optics, Marcin Świetlicki’s media persona could be associated with the selfish *homo oeconomicus*:

Then marketing, about marketing, with marketing, or promotion, with promotion, about promotion – this is Nurowska. The others lost. I will win. I’m great. Others give in to prolixity. After publishing the collection *Schism*, he does not want to be compared with Axl Rose from Guns N’Roses, because he is afraid that he is two people.

I thought to myself: indeed, one is a poet, and the other is an advertising agent.³⁵

In the mid-1990s, *Wielki bajer...* functioned primarily as a moralizing and grotesque attack on Natasza Goerke, Marcin Świetlicki and Marcin Baran and the fact that they had “sold out.” In response to these accusations, Sosnowski criticized literature created by the representatives of Henryk Bereza’s so-called artistic revolution, a school with which Musiała himself was associated:

[...] the average Polish reader, having learned from the sad experience of [Schubert’s] *Trenta Tre* or [Musiała’s] *Stan płynny* [Liquid form], prefers to reach for Wharton or Heller than risk reading a Polish debut novel. This distrust [...] must be overcome today by literature written by 30-somethings.

[...] you have to fight for the reader.³⁶

³²Marian Golka, *Rynek sztuki* [Art market] (Poznań: Artia, 1991); Marian Golka, *Socjologiczny obraz sztuki* [A sociological view of art] (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1996).

³³Golka also comment on it. On the one hand, he points to the unique value of a work of art as a commodity (although he does not define it in detail). On the other hand, he argues that the meaning of a work of art is identical with its potential use value: “Different works have [...] different use value: they offer different and varying values. When a given buyer (or buyers) gets to know the use of a given work of art he (they) effectively get to know its meaning, its importance. [...] Values expressed by a work of art (and the needs they correspond to) are usually difficult to grasp. Each recipient, each buyer, specifies them for his private use.” Golka, *Socjologiczny obraz sztuki*, 110–111.

³⁴“When the insinuating system is the market, and we are customers, then the insinuating system is us”. Brown, „Late postmodernism”, 9.

³⁵Grzegorz Musiała, „Wielki bajer czyli o czerwonych plackach, pejczach i jeszcze trochę” [Humbug: Red cakes, whips and more], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 7 (1995): 13.

³⁶Jerzy Sosnowski, „Grześ wśród Rastignaców” [Grześ among Rastignacs], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 4 (1995): 12.

Sosnowski observes that, and it is by no means commendable, contemporary writers ignore the wider political and social reality and focus only on themselves. Such a literary focus is a sign of, as Cywińska would say, culture that is no longer dependent on the economy.³⁷ More important than this social and literary diagnosis, however, is the fact that Sosnowski seems to imply that blurring the boundary between a literary work of art and a commodity is not so much inevitable as necessary. According to Sosnowski, “30-something writers” and not, for example, reviewers or even publishers, should focus on persuading the “average Polish reader” to give literature a chance – and “overcome distrust.” This postulate, however egalitarian, is still commercial, insofar as it relies on the understanding of freedom as access to various goods offered to various consumer groups.

So transparent was this conceptual matrix in the mid-1990s that we can also find it in Przemysław Czapliński’s classification of young prose writers presented in his 1995 article *Rzemieślnicy, kpiarze, immoraliści* [Craftsmen, mockers, immoralists], later included in the book *Ślady przełomu* [Traces of a breakthrough]. Czapliński defines the first group of writers, craftsmen, almost as professionals who could produce, for example, good-quality winter shoes: they are experts, specialists, they produce fine products.³⁸ Above all, however, craftsmen “respect the average understanding of what literature is and is not,” that is they write for a specific group of readers, bearing in mind what kind of literature they might want to read.³⁹ For Czapliński, such a characteristic has no negative connotations; although, interestingly, in a series of interviews with Piotr Śliwiński conducted between 1996 and 1998, both scholars refer to the features of a work of art as a commodity to criticize bestsellers.⁴⁰ Their critique, it is worth adding, is rather superficial. They point to the “unfair” practices of publishers, booksellers, and the media but not to the dominance of the commodity form in culture; they criticize bestsellers but not the more general mechanisms that are behind them.

At first glance, the immoralist who “[s]hould free himself from all cultural myths, taboos, prohibitions, systems of oppression, in a word, from everything that restrains the individual”⁴¹ should be the exact opposite of the craftsman. Not at all. As Czapliński observes:

The immoralist writes because writing is regarded by readers as a means of subjective expression, a way of representing the world or meeting aesthetic needs. [...] The [immoralist] is an artist without obligations: his art is a product, and he adapts it to (or contrasts it with) the ever-changing economic environment.⁴²

The immoralist, who creates works which are not as popular as those created by, for example, the “craftswoman” Olga Tokarczuk, simply writes for a different group of readers, with slightly

³⁷Michał Głowiński, „Socparnasizm” [Socialist Parnassianism], in: *Rytuał i demagogia: trzynaście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej* [Ritual and Demagogy: Thirteen Sketches on Degraded Art] (Warsaw: Open, 1992). The article was published in 1981. Głowiński first used the term “Socialist Parnassianism” in an article published in 1973, see: Michał Głowiński, “Tak jest dziwnie, tak jest inaczej” [It feels different, it feels strange], *Teksty* 10 (1973): 9–15.

³⁸Przemysław Czapliński, „Rzemieślnicy, kpiarze, immoraliści” [Craftsmen, mockers, immoralists], *Czas Kultury* 5/6 (1995): 4–5.

³⁹Czapliński, 5.

⁴⁰Piotr Śliwiński, Przemysław Czapliński, „Arcydzieło na tydzień” [One masterpiece per week], in: *Kontrapunkt. Rozmowy o książkach* [Counterpoint. Conversations about books] (Poznań: Obserwator, 1999), 167–171; Piotr Śliwiński, Przemysław Czapliński, „Paragon kasowy, czyli historia literatury w odcinkach” [Receipt, or the history of literature in episodes], in: *Kontrapunkt. Rozmowy o książkach* (Poznań: Obserwator, 1999), 163–166.

⁴¹Czapliński, „Rzemieślnicy, kpiarze, immoraliści”, 8.

⁴²Czapliński, 8.

less traditional tastes. Adapting to the “ever-changing economic environment” and opposing it are therefore two variants of the same gesture performed in relation to the market.

In 1997, Rafał Grupiński and Izolda Kiec devised their classification of young Polish prose and poetry writers which clearly alluded to Czapliński’s system.⁴³ They wanted to focus on different attitudes towards the new reality and not towards literature. And while Czapliński wrote about craftsmen, immoralists and mockers, Grupiński and Kiec wrote about the “unpleasant,” the “haughty, and the “rough.” Shifting the focus from professions and/or social roles to personal impressions is significant in itself. First, it seems to be a logical consequence of urging writers in the 1990s to understand their “direct relationship with their audience.” And what could be more direct than impressions? Secondly, “unpleasantness,” “haughtiness,” and “roughness” may be linked with the category of “emotional realism” which is central to *Niebawem spadnie błoto* [Soon mud will fall]. It defines the most general framework in which Grupiński and Kiec discuss writers as diverse as Andrzej Sosnowski, Jacek Podsiadło, Izabela Filipiak and Krzysztof Koehler.⁴⁴ From today’s perspective, it is not difficult to notice that “emotional realism,” which favors apoliticality, extreme individualism and the perspective of the specific, emotional, personal “I,” borrows heavily from Polish capitalist realism of the 1990s. However, what is much more interesting is what Grupiński and Kiec write about one of the “haughty” authors: Adam Wiedemann. The chapter devoted to the author of *Samczyk* [Male] brings together the problems which revolve around our previous considerations on the concept of commodity in Polish literary criticism. And the analysis of this fragment of *Niebawem spadnie błoto* will serve as a summary of the whole article.

Grupiński and Kiec criticize Wiedemann’s work from the quasi-market perspective of impatient and distrustful readers:

This kind of writing often irritates the reader; the reader, trying to carefully navigate this space, demands justification for his impressions, demands justification for the prolix description of a tram ride, a cold lunch [...]. The reader demands a literary justification for such a strategy [...].⁴⁵

Grupiński and Kiec’s comments should not be read only as a critique of Wiedemann’s work (expressed by other critics as well). Of course, the “demands” made on the stories collected in *Wszędobylstwa porządku* [The Omnipresence of Order] can be reformulated into interpretative questions concerning the meaning of the text, for example: “Why do we find such a long description of a tram ride in one of the stories?” However, Grupiński and Kiec do not write about questions but about demands: they write about readers demanding something other than what Wiedemann’s prose actually is

⁴³Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, „Schizmatycy, pielgrzymi, duchobiorcy, czyli niezrównana całość, która się rozpadła...” [Schismatics, pilgrims, Doukhobours, or, the unsurpassed whole that has fallen apart ...], in: *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* [Soon mud will fall, or a few remarks on unpleasant literature] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 53–54.

⁴⁴Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, „Emocjonalny realizm” [Emotional realism], in: *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 145–149.

⁴⁵Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu” [In search of perfect pitch], in: *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 112. While they adopt this perspective, Grupiński and Kiec still mock the segmentation of the book market: “Umberto Eco is for the lovers of erudite journeys into the past; if you love scandal, John Irving is for you; Maria Nurowska is your pick, if you like women’s prose”, Rafał Grupiński, Izolda Kiec, *Niebawem spadnie błoto czyli Kilka uwag o literaturze nieprzyjemnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Obserwator, 1997), 125.

– perhaps some additional explanations (“justifications”) for the “external” factors which determined the final form of the book. The problem is that, as Nicholas Brown argues, objects, including books, which function as commodities are made with their external use-value in mind:⁴⁶

If I make a bowl for the market, I am primarily concerned only with one attribute, its exchangeability – that is, the demand for bowls. That demand, and therefore all of the concrete attributes that factor into that demand, are decided elsewhere – namely, on the market. Intention is realized in exchange but not registered in the object. While I still make decisions about my bowls, those decisions no longer matter as intentions even for me, because they are entirely subordinated to more or less informed guesses about other people’s desires.⁴⁷

At the end of this quoted excerpt, the two critics write that “the author [Wiedemann] haughtily tells his readers: it is so because I want it to be so.”⁴⁸ Wiedemann’s alleged “haughtiness” has nothing to do with declarative, emphatic opposition to mass culture, an attitude that is easily commodified, as seen in Bohdan Zadura’s, Tadeusz Różewicz’s⁴⁹ or Ewa Lipska’s⁵⁰ later works. Indeed, Wiedemann’s approach should remind us of culture “with a life of its own,” culture that does not cater to the demands of the market. One could say that Grupiński and Kiec find Wiedemann’s novel problematic because this book in a peculiar way emphasizes that it is governed by its own internal rules (“it is so because I want it to be so”). Therefore, at the end of the chapter devoted to Wiedemann, they find something else to complain about:

Adam Wiedemann’s works are poetry [...]; they are formally beautiful but very complex and difficult to access in what is their true inner element [...]; Wiedemann’s works are open before the reader’s eyes, and at the same time they are finished, almost perfect; so, the reader can see and find in them only as much or as little as the author allows them.⁵¹

As absurd as it may sound, Grupiński and Kiec seem to accuse the writer of creating literary works that are complex, thought-provoking, focused on the form, in other words, works which simply require interpretation. Perhaps Grupiński and Kiec would prefer it if Wiedemann’s works met the reader’s, that is, the market’s expectations and did not impose anything on them; in a word, they should be more like any other market commodity.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴⁶Brown tries to prove that Marx’s concept of the product of labor uninfluenced by market demands is rooted in Hegelian externalization, which in turn for Brown is a reinterpretation of Kantian aesthetic judgment. See: Brown, “Introduction. On Art and Commodity Form”, 4–8. Interestingly, in their analysis of Wiedemann’s prose, Grupiński and Kiec claim that it is “[...] essentially that Kantian disinterestedness, which allegedly should characterize art”. Grupiński, Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu”, 112.

⁴⁷Brown, „Introduction. On Art and Commodity Form”, 7.

⁴⁸Grupiński, Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu”, 112.

⁴⁹See: Anna Kałuża, “Estetyczna autonomia poezji: krytyka kultury masowej” [The aesthetic autonomy of poetry: a critique of mass culture], in: *Bumerang. Szkice o polskiej poezji przełomu XX i XXI wieku* [Boomerang. Essays on Polish poetry at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2010); Łukasz Żurek, “Lustro akustyczne” [Acoustic mirror], *Dwutygodnik*, May 2018, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7796-lustro-akustyczne.html>.

⁵⁰See: Anna Kałuża, „Pęknięcia” [Cracks], in: *Wielkie wygrane. Wspólne sprawy poezji, krytyki i estetyki* [Big wins. Shared questions of poetry, criticism and aesthetics] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2011), 224–227.

⁵¹Grupiński, Kiec, „W poszukiwaniu absolutnego słuchu”, 113.

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KEYWORDS

NICHOLAS BROWN

commodity form theory

ABSTRACT:

In the first part of the article, the author attempts to employ concepts discussed by Nicholas Brown in *Autonomy. The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* in the analysis of the history of Polish literary criticism. In the second part, inspired by the project of critical constellations, the author traces the manifestations of the aesthetic ideology characteristic of late capitalist societies, according to which a literary work is a commodity like any other. He analyzes heterogeneous critical writings from the 1990s.

HISTORY
OF POLISH
LITERARY
CRITICISM

AUTONOMY OF LITERATURE

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