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CENSORSHIP OF EROTIC THEMES IN LITERARY FICTION IN POLAND IN THE YEARS 1948–1958. A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

The subject of the article is the moral censorship in Poland in the years 1948–1958. The history of the purification of erotic content from literary fiction published in the Polish language is long. Interference in works considered derogatory to morality, besides the invasion in political, anti-government, anti-religious (and therefore in general – anti-system) content, is the most durable and versatile directive.

The author describes examples of moral censorship on examples of many important literary works: renewed, published for the first time and translated from foreign languages.

All examples are based on source materials of the Central Audit Office for the Press Publications and Performances (GUKPPIW) team, stored in the Archives of New Records (AAN) in Warsaw.

Keywords: censorship, Polish literature of the 20th century, communist period, erotic themes in literary fiction

Introduction

The history of the purification of erotic content from literary fiction published in the Polish language is long. Interference in works considered derogatory to morality, besides the invasion in political, anti-government, anti-religious (and therefore in general – anti-system) content, is the most durable and versatile directive. The purity of morals was guarded by both the censorship operating in the Republic of Nobles, then – during annexation, as well as the institutions of the Second Republic. Dissemination of erotic content was strictly forbidden in Soviet Russia, on which the censorship system was modeled after 1945. Censorship in the Polish People's Republic had an example to base on.

The issue was regulated by the Decree of 5 July 1946 on the foundation of the Central Audit Office for the Press Publications and Performances (GUKPPIW), in which we read:

Art. 2. The tasks of the Central Office are:

(...)

2) to control the dissemination of all kinds of works using print, video and the spoken word; the aim of this control is to prevent:

- a) the undermining of the political system of the Polish State,
- b) disclosure of state secrets,
- c) violation of the international relations of the Polish State,
- d) ***violation of law or good manners***,
- e) the misleading of the public by the dissemination of messages inconsistent with reality (Nałęcz, 1994).

An understanding of what is not allowed with regard to erotica varies depending on the environment and time. Something different interferes with decency in the prudish 50s, something else in the 1970s and 80s. Different content violates the morality of conservative circles, compared to what offends liberals. Difficulties in defining the notion of pornography are also worth mentioning. Researchers believe that “the features of pornography don’t belong to the works, but only to their concretization” (Ziomek, 1974:67).

An important issue seems to be the social acceptance, and even – some support of moral censorship. While the distortion of political content or building a false image of the world was met with ostracism in Poland in the 1940s and 50s, interference with erotic content can be considered compatible with the social need for abstinence.

Examples

All examples are based on source materials of the Central Audit Office for the Press Publications and Performances (GUKPPiW) team, stored in the Archives of New Records (AAN) in Warsaw.

1. Reprints of Polish texts from the first half of the twentieth century.

The erotic novel *Dzieje grzechu /The Story of Sin/* (1908) by Stefan Żeromski was issued for the first time after the war in 1948, and then – only in the framework of *Dziela /The Works/*, after 1956.

The post-war edition of the controversial novel *Zmory/The Nightmares/* by Emil Zegadłowicz (1935) took place during the “thaw” in 1957. However, the most pervasively erotic novel *Motory/The Motorcycles/* by Zegadłowicz, considered offensive from the moment of its creation and confiscated following a judgment of the District Court in Krakow in 1937 (repressive censorship), only saw the light of day in the Polish People’s Republic in 1981 (Szałagan, 2004: 437–438).

2. Polish texts submitted for the issue for the first time.

An interesting example is the editorial fate of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s dramas: *Szewcy/The Cobblers/* and *W małym dworku /In a Small Manor House/*. They were written before the war and published in “Czytelnik” in 1948. In 1950 they were re-inspected by GUKPPiW, in connection with an attempt at republication. In its opinion, the censor refers to the abundance of erotic themes in both texts and on that basis determined not only to not grant permission to re-print, but also to

withdraw the existing edition from circulation (AAN, GUKPPiW, signature 145, folder 31/26, p. 839–840).

Wertepy by Leopold Buczkowski, a novel written before the war, was issued for the first time in 1947 by a private publishing house “Gebethner and Wolff.” The two surviving censorship opinions of the late 1940s do not contain accusations of spreading pornography (AAN, GUKPPiW, signature 408, p. 329–330). However, when the publishing house asked for a renewal in 1953, permission was not granted. *Wertepy* was not published during the Stalinist period.

In 1958, censorship forbade the publication of the contemporary novel *Siedem dalekich rejsów / Seven Long Voyages/* by Leopold Tyrmand. The archival materials of GUKPPiW bear an annotation that the text was stopped entirely due to the spread of immorality (AAN, GUKPPiW, signature 591, folder 60/2, p. 12). The first Polish edition came after nearly twenty years, in London in 1975, and in Poland – in “Czytelnik” in 1992.

Bramy raju /Gates of Paradise/ – a short novel by Jerzy Andrzejewski was also met with sharp accusations. The date of creation of the work – September 1959, meant that the text appeared in the “thaw” transformations and also in a time where disappointment was felt at their defeat. Its fate also illustrated a new and difficult issue for censorship officials’, of controlling homosexual erotica. The work was to be published in installments in an exclusive journal edition “Argumenty”, which ultimately did not happen. The novel was published in a limited edition “Twórczość” and then – at the end of 1960 – published as a book with, for those times, a small circulation of 5 000 copies (Budrowska 2009:127–133).

3. Foreign texts.

In the spring of 1958 “Czytelnik” wanted some short stories by Samuel Beckett to be issued. The censor states categorically: “In some areas **descriptions are disgusting- pornographic**. (emphasis added – K. B.). Due to the fact that the item is of little value and translated from French, I think (regardless of interference) it would be advisable not to print it (loss of effort and money)” (AAN, GUKPPiW, signature 427, folder 34/5, p. 200). Next he proposed a number of interferences that were not taken into account and the volume was issued later in the same year.

In the late 50s another official of GUKPPiW evaluated *W poszukiwaniu straconego czasu /In Search of Lost Time/* by Marcel Proust as a work describing “sexual deviations” (AAN, GUKPPiW, signature 650, p. 532). Volumes 6 and 7 of the series (volumes 1-5 were published in the years 1937–1939) were finally issued in 1960.

However, Polish translation of the novel by Jean Genet could appear only in the 80s (Świstak 2010:116–117).

Conclusions

Only a few texts making issues of human sexuality came to the attention of the GUKPPiW. Literature of the 1940s and '50s was itself prudish and focused around other topics: until 1949 - World War II, then - artificially initiated problems of social realism.

The sphere of morality is the most important, non-doctrinal subject questioned by censorship. The changes came only with the "thaw", when sexuality appeared as one of the "new" topics, corresponding to the requirements of a more modern audience. Moral censorship became softer at that time, which seemed to be – next to the restoration of the subject of war, an openness to western literature, excellent (often late) debuts and release of proscribed books ("drawer novels" or "shelf novels") – the permanent achievement of this important period. Polish audiences no longer wanted to go back to the shyness of the Stalinist years. A sense of what is indecent and the practice of controls began to diverge in Poland after 1956. What is more, it seems that the ability to speak on erotic subjects became a kind of "safety valve", which led to the discharge of many social tensions.

The primary method of censoring the Polish classics, in which there are erotic threads, is to prevent further releases. Such action, together with the state of book collections destroyed during the Second World War, in the long run was to equal its elimination.

The subject of erotic literature printed in the Polish People's Republic appeared – on an unprecedented earlier scale – only after the lifting of martial law (Andrzej Rodan, Zbigniew Nienacki). In such a way the authorities attempted to divert public attention from the political, economic and social crisis of the 1980s.

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