

Mixed Blessings of Freedom: American Literature in Poland Under and After Communism

Jerzy Durczak

When in 1989, after decades of Communist rule, Poland—much to the surprise of its own citizens—became a free and democratic state, it was obvious that the country was going to undergo major changes in almost every sphere of life. Quite understandably, most people were anxious to see a quick and successful economic transformation; after years of shortages and lines Poles wanted to see their stores well-stocked and lines gone forever. There were, naturally, other concerns and expectations. Many wondered, for example, how the new market economy, democratic system, and abolition of censorship would affect the country's mass media, its educational system, its daily life and culture in general. Spectacular changes were, in fact, happening very quickly. The years following the collapse of Communism, tough and trying for many, at the same time proved to be fascinating and educational.

For me as a teacher of American literature at a Polish university, it was particularly interesting, though often frustrating, to watch various changes take place in my own field. The frustrating aspect was that contemporary, high-brow American literature, which I have always enjoyed teaching and cared for so much, lost much of its special position and appeal after 1989. Many of my students, once full of enthusiasm and admiration for contemporary American writers and attracted to ambitious and complex texts such as, say, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, or Thomas Pynchon's *The Gravity's Rainbow*, turned to a much lighter literature. It was not just students of English, many of whom still have much higher esthetic standards, who left behind "literature;" the so-called general reader, to a much greater degree, seems to have lost interest in more ambitious

kinds of writing. Paradoxically, under Communism, American literature in many ways fared better than during the recent ten years of freedom and democracy.

Before the Second World War, American literature was not particularly respected in Poland and never reached the high status of French, German, or Russian writing, but after the war its position began to change rapidly. To better understand this reversal, we must first look at Poland's postwar historical and cultural contexts. Though the country was not liberated by American troops, knowledge of the American contribution to the victory over the Nazis was widespread. Admiration for America's great economic power was also accompanied by great respect for its military strength, which—many Poles hoped—would one day help Poland become fully independent. As a result of the war's outcome, however, the country found itself in the so-called Soviet Bloc; for many years this domination shaped almost every aspect of life in Poland. Poles—victorious but not independent, victorious but economically impoverished—watched with envy how Germany, the country that had started the war, and had lost, recovered with American help and became an independent and prosperous state. At that time, many Poles naïvely believed that the United States would one day liberate their country, save it from the Soviets, and help it become free, efficient, and prosperous. It is not surprising, then, that after World War II the United States was viewed with fascination and respect by many Poles.

For almost a decade, however, that interest could not be expressed openly. During the tough period of Stalinism—the late forties and the early fifties—America was treated as the major political enemy of Poland and other “peace loving nations.” The newspapers presented a very critical picture of America, describing the country exclusively as a place of great social inequalities, racial discrimination, and widespread crime that was run by a clique of greedy capitalists and warmongers. Satirical magazines published anti-American cartoons, street posters displayed caricatures of American politicians, and many participants in political rallies and parades carried banners expressing anti-American sentiments and chanted anti-American slogans. In such a situation showing any sign of one's interest in America or any public demonstration of one's support for the country and its values was treated as unpatriotic, anticommunist, and, ultimately, subversive.

The authorities who must have been aware of those pro-American sentiments, tried to restrict citizens' access to American culture. In the years immediately following World War II, no American films or plays were shown to Polish audiences, while jazz—described as a singularly decadent music genre—was simply banned. The situation of American literature was only slightly better.

After 1948, as Communist control tightened, all publishing and printing houses were nationalized, while literature began to be judged primarily for its adherence to Marxist doctrine. It was no longer the publisher who decided which books by foreign authors were to be made available to the Polish reader. Such decisions could now be undertaken only with the approval of the state censorship

office. This does not mean that books by American authors were not published. Sponsored by the state, cheap editions of some classic American authors (e.g. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, Jack London's *White Fang*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*) began to show up in bookstores. A few novels by American naturalists also appeared—naturalists were particularly favored by the Communist Party. Authors who condemned aggressive American capitalism—Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair—were considered “politically correct” and suitable for the Polish reader. But even more “correct” were authors of the proletarian novel, such as Howard Fast (laureate of a Stalin International Peace Prize) or Albert Maltz (another American Communist writer), who were promoted and published in tens of thousands of copies.

During the years 1948-1956—often referred to later as the “period of cultural error”—Polish readers thus had an incomplete and distorted picture of American literature. Many readers, however, suspected that America had much more to offer, and these suspicions were confirmed. After 1956, in the post-Stalinist era or the “Thaw,” they were given access to a more complete picture. Several critics referred to the three years following 1956 as “the invasion of Americans.”¹¹ This was not exactly the kind of invasion some Poles had been waiting for, but it was most certainly welcome.

American culture suddenly became accessible. Readers of illustrated magazines discovered that the United States was not only the country of Ku Klux Klan lynchings and big city slums, but that it also had beautiful national parks, a system of good highways, excellent universities, comfortable cars, and a lively and pervasive popular culture. American movies (mostly westerns) started to be introduced to the Polish audiences, making John Wayne, Gregory Peck, Grace Kelly, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe the most admired actors in Poland. Jazz—first banned and then cautiously introduced on the radio as “the music expressing the freedom longings of the oppressed, the working-class, and of American Blacks”—became a very popular and fashionable kind of music that drew hundreds or even thousands of fans to jazz concerts and festivals. Rock and roll won an even greater and more enthusiastic following. Soon many Polish bands were singing (in broken English) the major hits of Bill Haley and the Comets and Elvis Presley.

Major changes were also happening in the distribution and circulation of literature. After 1956, censors became less strict and less alert. Suddenly, books by a wide range of American authors from different literary periods, representing different literary schools and different styles, appeared in bookstores. Translations of novels and collections of short stories by Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Erskine Caldwell, Thomas Wolfe, William Saroyan, Norman Mailer, and many others were published in Polish. The most successful authors, however, whose popularity persisted into the late 1970s,

were Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck. Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light In August*, as well as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* all became major bestsellers. Such books were published in large numbers of copies and were often reprinted, but they would always disappear from bookstores within hours.

This "invasion of Americans" created a certain chaos in the reception of American literature. Readers were confused by the great number of new books, new authors, new ways of writing, and new ways of depicting America and its society. All those new and diverse works, now widely available to Polish readers, caused a major change in the perception of the United States. Traditional or stereotyped concepts turned out to be false or outdated. The naturalists, so popular in the early 1950s, lost their importance. Poles discovered that American literature was much more than social criticism, as the state-controlled media and publishers had wanted them to believe. In no time, Hemingway became a cult author, chiefly because of the romantic quality of his writings, and his praise of liberty. The author of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has for a long time been unquestionably the most popular and respected author in Poland, and his popularity persists to the present: a recent (1999) poll organized by the much respected *Polityka* magazine identified him as the most important twentieth century writer,² while a deluxe edition of his collected works is scheduled for publication in the next few years.

Another newly prominent writer after 1956, though mostly among literary critics and more sophisticated audiences, was William Faulkner. Often compared to Fyodor Dostoevsky and Joseph Conrad, Faulkner was respected mainly for the southern setting of his writings. The American South, with its complex and even contradictory ideals, traditions, sentiments, and manners, was familiar to Poles from their own country's equally complex and contradictory patriotic, aristocratic, and romantic traditions.

However, the political "thaw" in Poland did not last long. Although they were less rigid and dogmatic than their Stalinist predecessors, for the next decade (primarily spanning the 1960s), party censors again became quite strict about what could be published. Readers' interest in American literature remained very lively, however. In the 1960s, several well-known American writers and poets visited Poland: John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, Arthur Miller, and others had a chance to meet and talk with their Polish readers. Polish theaters successfully staged plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee. Many new authors—Truman Capote, Bernard Malamud, James Baldwin, J.D. Salinger, John Updike—were introduced to the Polish reading public. Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck still outsold others, but many other authors' books would sell out in a matter of hours.

The 1960s also saw the appearance and growing popularity of American poetry, which was never so well known in Poland as American fiction. Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, and Robinson Jeffers were

among the poets who had volumes published in that decade. For a fuller picture of American poetry, though, the Polish reader had to wait until the 1980s, when several comprehensive anthologies of American literature appeared in print.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s interest in American literature was enormous, but the number of books by American authors on the market, though impressive when compared with the figures from the Stalinist period, was still limited. One reason was the economic situation in Poland—principally paper shortages and nonconvertible currency. A second factor was particularly important: in the early 1950s, some books by American authors were, in fact, pirate editions. Their authors received no royalties and sometimes were even unaware that their books were bestsellers in Poland. After 1956 the situation changed; publishers began to negotiate with literary agents of American authors and to request permission to publish their books. Few foreign authors, however, could hope to receive royalties in hard currency. Instead, they were offered Polish money, worthless in the West and negotiable only in Poland. The ideal situation for publishers, then, was to persuade foreign authors to accept their royalties in Polish money, open bank accounts for them, and put the money in those accounts to be picked up by the writers should they ever visit Poland. A few authors did indeed come to claim their money, only to find themselves in the difficult situation of having to spend a small fortune within a few days, at a time when shortages on the market were quite common. For many authors, especially for those less known at home, having a book translated into a foreign language and published overseas was sufficiently rewarding and prestigious, so some did not even expect royalties.

During the 1970s, the situation of American literature started to improve again. The beginning of the decade brought another “thaw,” a new government, a political change. The second relaxation of the so-called “cultural policy” resulted in the establishment in Warsaw of a highly important and much respected literary magazine, *Literatura na swiecie* (“Literature in the World”), which for two decades was the main source of information about contemporary American writing, and published a multitude of articles, reviews and translations of prose and poetry. Staffed and supported by young, talented admirers of American literature, the magazine played a crucial role in popularizing American writing in Poland. *Literatura na swiecie* introduced Polish readers to excerpts from works by John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, John Irving, Ken Kesey, Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, Raymond Federman, Robert Coover, Joan Didion, John Hawkes, John Gardner, William Gass, Thomas Pynchon, Gilbert Sorrentino, Le Roi Jones, John Ashbery, and dozens of others.

Full length books were being published as well. The major publishing successes of the 1970s included several of Kurt Vonnegut’s novels—*Cat’s Cradle*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*—as well as *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. They all sold out immediately, were checked out from public libraries (quite often never to be returned),

and were celebrated and widely discussed. However, the greatest controversy was not over Vonnegut's novels or *The Bell Jar*. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, which was first published in Poland in 1975, became for many the book of the 1970s. The first edition of *Catch-22* was practically unavailable and was distributed through private channels by bookstore employees, many of whom charged a triple price for it. Yossarian, the book's protagonist, became many young people's favorite fictional character. As someone who rebelled against authority and tried to fight a senseless system, he was particularly attractive to Poles, many of whom were involved in their own quiet struggle with an absurd system they could not accept.

Catch-22 received numerous reviews. Most concentrated on the pacifistic ideas of the novel, and were, in a way, replies to the fierce attack on Joseph Heller made by Wojciech Zukrowski, a Polish writer and World War II veteran. To Zukrowski, Heller's book was repulsive and inhuman, and the book's black humor did not seem funny to him, since it mocked a "just" war. The writer-critic contrasted *Catch-22* with Soviet realistic war novels, trying to demonstrate what, in his opinion, good war fiction should be.³ His arguments against the book resembled those presented in several discussions of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The older generation of critics seemed to think that the war effort against the Nazis should not be treated by writers in a light-hearted way. They insisted that those who fought in World War II should be treated with respect and reverence. The war was too tragic an event to serve as a setting for a comedy. History should be respected rather than mocked. Such views were prevalent throughout all of the countries of Eastern Europe that had fallen victim to the war's devastation and genocide. Interestingly, not all critics shared such attitudes. Most younger critics presented a much different perspective by openly defying critical opposition to Heller and calling the book a masterpiece, both humane and aesthetically significant. While not very popular among World War II veterans, Heller and Vonnegut were, perhaps, the most popular authors among students; both acquired a cult status in Poland.

The introduction of martial law in Poland in December of 1981 was a major event in the country's postwar history. Many politically active writers and intellectuals were interned, literary magazines were closed for several months, and publishing houses were assigned military "advisors." Many people expected that the flourishing of American literature and culture would come to a sudden end, that the military authorities would do their best to promote the kind of art that they considered to be safe and politically acceptable. This, however, did not really happen. The popularity of American movies remained unaffected while American, and American-influenced, rock music was actually promoted by the state-controlled media as a kind of "safety valve." The authorities of martial law preferred to see young people smoking pot at rock concerts and festivals than conspiring against the system or demonstrating in the streets. As far as literature is concerned, *Literatura na swiecie* continued introducing recent developments in American literature, while books by American authors were still published. In

addition, the quickly expanding underground publishing industry began to supply readers with books—such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night* and Jerzy Kosinski’s *Steps*—not published by the state-owned publishing houses.

Moreover the situation in English departments all over Poland and the teaching of American literature was unaffected by the political crackdown of 1981. My own students, or students of English in general, did not have to resort to Polish translations, underground or legal of American works. They were all expected to read them in the original English department libraries, supported by the American Embassy in Warsaw and, often, by American Fulbright professors teaching within them, giving students access to books that were unavailable in Polish translation. Though access to the most recent publications was still severely limited, we were not, unlike many of our neighbors, restricted by any authorities in selecting materials for study, or in adopting any specific methodologies. Paradoxically, in a country dominated by the Marxist ideology, Marxism as a literary approach was considered a very exotic and not quite serious approach to literature in English departments all over the country, the most popular critical approaches being structuralism, Russian formalism, and close reading.

Our students knew very well that with access to American publications, however limited, they were in many ways privileged. That is why they were generally grateful for any texts or reading suggestions and seemed as interested in canonical texts such as *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Great Gatsby*, as in new experimental fiction by such authors as Robert Coover or Donald Barthelme. Their interests, of course, were not strictly literary—many were interested in music, film, or politics. They cherished their copies of *Time* and *Newsweek*, which at that time were simply unavailable in Polish stores, and they always made certain to see every American movie that made it to Poland.

This general, nation-wide fascination with America, American literature, film, or music most certainly had a political background. The U.S.A. was perceived as the country that might one day change the course of history so as to bring freedom to Poland. The United States was treated as the leader of the free and democratic world, a country that with its highly efficient economic system, provided its own citizens as well as immigrants with good jobs, homes, and cars. Many young Poles fervently believed in the American Dream and demonstrated interest and support for anything American. They certainly differed from their Western European counterparts by, for example, minimizing or refusing to acknowledge the importance of America’s racial problems, and by responding with ambivalence, to say the least, to American military involvement in Vietnam. Thus, young Polish students could not easily comprehend the American protest movement of the sixties and seventies. They were often infatuated with the American counterculture, sympathetic to the hippies, their lifestyles, and their music, interested in Allen Ginsberg or Norman Mailer, but openly critical of the leftist political views of many counterculture figures. It was not unusual to meet Polish fans of, say, Joan Baez’s, Bob Dylan’s, or Country Joe’s protest songs who

firmly believed that Americans should not retreat from their involvement in Vietnam.

Since very few Polish students could travel to the United States, for a long time it remained a myth, a place located in the imagination rather than an actual place on a map with its real troubles and problems. But even the rare few who had a chance to visit relatives in Chicago, New York, Buffalo, or Detroit invariably came back fascinated with America—that is, if they chose to return at all. Showing interest in American culture and demonstrating support for America was, basically, a safe and rather harmless act of opposition against the Communist system.

The year 1989 brought enormous changes to Poland. Transition to the new political and economic system was swift and peaceful. Changes were visible in a matter of months. Americans who visited Poland, say, in 1984 and returned ten years later were surprised to find well-stocked shops and supermarkets, in addition to the ubiquitous McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, KFC, Holiday Inn, Marriott Hotel, and so on. They were surprised that the chief trademark of Communism—lines in front of stores—had vanished. Those who remembered from earlier visits small, dingy bookstores with a few unattractive-looking books could now visit modern, airy, bright places with open stacks, displaying hundreds of attractive and colorful volumes. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and even *Playboy* were now easily available.

Changes in the publishing market were as spectacular as changes elsewhere. Suddenly, almost overnight, censorship disappeared; political advisors who under Communism had told editors what to publish and what to ignore lost their jobs. Enterprising young people found that they could run their own publishing houses, and that they could even pay foreign authors in hard currency, buy rights for virtually any book, and still make a profit. Several state-owned publishing companies became privatized; their owners no longer had to worry about the availability of paper, for under the new economic system paper magically became available. They could now publish whatever they wanted, in as many copies as they desired.

The post-Communist period, in regard to the reception of American literature, can be roughly divided into two stages. The first extended from 1989 to 1992; the other one still continues. The first stage saw an unprecedented publishing boom. Almost every week new translations of works by American authors appeared in bookstores, and, to everyone's surprise, did not sell out within hours. Not because nobody was buying them, but simply because supply had finally met demand. It was a relief to realize that you did not have to get up in the morning before bookstores opened, or that you no longer had to date the bookstore manager's daughter to get books by American authors. Publishers seemed to want to make up for years of limitation and stagnation, for many new editions of classics appeared (this time in nice, attractive covers). Novels and collections of stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Henry

James were suddenly available in bookstores all over the country. Some important works were published for the first time—Henry D. Thoreau's *Walden* came out in 1990, for example. Contemporary authors like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, John Updike, Bernard Malamud, William Styron, and John Irving had many books translated, and they all sold very well. Publishers could finally make a profit selling books written by authors once considered politically suspect or thought to offer Polish youth immoral, decadent patterns of behavior.

All the novels by Jerzy Kosinski, for a long time considered by the Communist authorities to be Poland's chief slanderer, were published. Overnight, Kosinski became a celebrity, almost a national hero. He made the headlines; he was on TV and on the radio. Only a year earlier, his books had been routinely confiscated by Customs. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, banned for three decades for promoting "immoral life styles," was published and even read in installments on public radio. William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, which celebrated drugs and gay sex, was translated and advertised as one of the most important novels of recent decades. Vladimir Nabokov, once banned for his critical attitude toward the Soviet Union, suddenly became a well-known writer in Poland. Ken Kesey, whose *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was once considered by cautious and paranoid censors an allegory of life in a Communist country and was therefore banned, now had most of his books published. His tour of several Polish cities in 1993 turned out to be an important literary event. Auditoriums were packed, standing ovations were routine, and people lined up for hours to have their books signed.

In the early 1990s, a new literary phenomenon occurred. The market became flooded by American thrillers, tales of horror, and romances. Stephen King, Robert Ludlum, and Tom Clancy, authors almost unknown in Poland, became celebrities overnight. Popular literature in glossy, attractive covers crowded the works of John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, and Norman Mailer off the store shelves. Moreover, even the celebrated classics of American popular fiction by writers such as Stephen King or Robert Ludlum were soon joined by little-known authors of what many in Poland call trash romances, all written according to the same Harlequin pattern. The kind of pulp fiction displayed in racks by supermarket check-out counters in America quickly started replacing serious fiction even in bookstores that had traditionally specialized in ambitious literature. Although some Polish fiction writers turned for commercial reasons to less ambitious, more sensational kinds of writing, they did not become particularly successful. It was mostly American popular literature that dominated the market.

The major change during the early nineties was the unprecedented number of new titles available. Many readers were understandably confused: they suddenly faced a vast choice of excellent novels, and at the same time a glut of low-brow, sensational writing. What confused readers even more was, quite often, the poor quality of translations. In the 1970s and 1980s, literary translation

in Poland had been an intellectual and artistic challenge, a passion rather than a profession. Many books published then were masterpieces of the art of translation. The best translators were not adequately rewarded and, in fact, made little money. What they earned instead was the respect of readers, praise in literary periodicals, and high social status. The moment translators realized that in the new economic reality it was finally possible to make good money on translations, many switched from working on long, artistically meaningful novels to spy stories and romances. Instead of sweating for months or years over a masterpiece with limited sales potential, a translator, often working under a variety of pseudonyms, could turn out several titles a year for the profitable pulp fiction market.

Furthermore, because the best translators turned to less ambitious literature—at one point almost monopolizing the market—young and inexperienced practitioners were left with those texts that would not sell so well, i.e. highbrow fiction. Sometimes they were successful; often, however, the quality of their work was poor and thus inadequately conveyed a translated writer's significance in American letters to the Polish reader.

Taking all this into consideration, it is not surprising that the most celebrated American authors in Poland in the past few years were little known in the United States and had little respect among literary critics. For example, William Wharton and Jonathan Carroll, American writers based in Europe, today enjoy a cult status among young Polish readers and are invariably named by them as their favorite authors.

One very special case is the great—and totally deserved—popularity of the Nobel prize winner, Isaac Bashevis Singer. It is the Polish-Jewish, and not the American quality of his writings, however, that makes him the favorite author of many Poles. Singer is not really considered an American writer by Poles, as he wrote mostly in Yiddish and rarely dealt with American issues, topics, and places. Interestingly, Singer is particularly popular among those young people who treat his books not only as fascinating products of the author's unique literary imagination, but as highly informative texts about the complex nature of Polish-Jewish relations in pre-World War II Poland.

The same publishing boom that brought Isaac Bashevis Singer such popularity and that introduced William Wharton, Jonathan Carroll, and many others to Polish readers, lasted for approximately four years. Around 1993, most publishers realized that selling books in Poland was becoming a problem. It seems that around that time the market had become saturated. Readers discovered that a colorful cover and all kinds of advertising gimmicks do not necessarily make a book great. Also, the continually rising prices of books put many titles beyond the reach of an average reader. Books that were once very inexpensive became affordable only for the few in the new post-Communist reality. Several publishing houses found themselves on the verge of bankruptcy. Those that survived the crisis became more cautious when selecting books for publication. Many stopped

publishing new editions of classics altogether and became unwilling to publish novels by contemporary authors of serious fiction, the same authors who had earned them a lot of money only a few years before.

Sales of books that seemed almost sure to become major publishing hits were indeed disappointing. Heller's *Closing Time*, advertised and conceived as another *Catch-22*, was only a mild success, and Nabokov's legendary *Lolita* did not sell very well; the scandalous *American Psycho* by Easton Brett Ellis, which evoked much controversy in other countries and was supposed to be a major publishing hit, went almost unnoticed. The novels of Ken Kesey, whose *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* had become a cult novel, were not selling well. Today it is no longer possible to predict which books are sure bets in the current market. The meaning of success has become different as well—no longer five or six hundred thousand copies sold, but merely ten or twelve thousand.

American fiction has certainly enjoyed greater popularity in Poland than American poetry. Surprisingly, though, poetry is doing relatively well. Expectations of poetry publishers are not too high. They know poetry is less in demand than fiction, and consequently do not anticipate exorbitant profits. Recent years have brought many interesting, often bilingual, collections of major American poets, old and new (Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, John Ashbery, and James Merrill, to mention only a few). Though none was a spectacular success and none outsold poetry collections by Polish Nobel prize winners Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska, they all sold quite well.

Probably the best-selling American poetry volume in the 1990s was a collection of shorter poems by Allen Ginsberg.⁴ It did not, however, become a bestseller by virtue of its author's talent or fame. The volume was originally published in Krakow by a new Catholic publishing house, Wydawnictwom, in 1993. When the first copies of the book were sent to bookstores, someone informed the publishers about Ginsberg's sexual orientation. News of Ginsberg's homosexuality, well known to his readers, came as a shock to his unwitting publishers. They panicked and decided—without much success—to recall Ginsberg's volume from bookstores. They still had to do something with the volumes remaining in their warehouse. Destroying them would bring very bad publicity, especially since the press had begun to ridicule their behavior. Eventually, they decided to sell the remaining copies to another publishing house, Total-Trade and Publishers.⁵ They hastily obliterated the name of the original publishing house with a rubber stamp, printing a crude "x" sign on every single copy. The book sold out quickly.

Some people have interpreted this farcical incident as an example of a new, emerging Catholic censorship. However, that a non-Catholic publisher could easily buy and resell the volume shows that such interpretations are completely unfounded. Though in several instances the Church has objected to some TV shows and movies (for example, Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Jesus Christ* remains practically unknown in Poland), the book publishing market has re-

mained unaffected by any kind of censorship. It seems that the Church, aware of its limited powers, now concentrates on two pursuits: banning abortion (with much success) and barring pornography from bookstores and newspaper stands (with virtually no success).

In 1999 the market remains flooded with books of William Wharton and Jonathan Carroll as well as with even less demanding Harlequin romances and the novels of Judith Krantz and Danielle Steel. A similar phenomenon is taking place in film. Privatized film distribution companies in search of profit concentrate almost exclusively on commercial Hollywood productions and ignore the more sophisticated and “artistic” films produced in Western Europe or Poland, or for that matter independent American films. Polish movies have to be based on well-tested, popular Hollywood formulas in order to be successful. This has been well understood by many young Polish movie directors whose recent films are technically as flawless as they are irrelevant. The Polish TV viewer not only may watch the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, or *Baywatch*, but also a variety of home-made soap operas, sitcoms, and gossipy talk-shows. Just like Americans, Poles can now also read about their favorite TV personalities and their pets in dozens of glossy magazines devoted to gossip and sensation.

Why have so many Poles suddenly turned to less-ambitious, low-brow literature or film, or—as some would say—to kitsch? This question has been the subject of much research. Despite what sociologists and culture experts say, it seems that the main reason for the change is simply that such literature or films are suddenly widely available. In Communist Poland the government, which often severely censored literature or film, at the same time—especially in the 1950s and 1960s—tried to keep the popular culture of the West away from its citizens. American fiction published in Poland was usually of the more ambitious, sophisticated kind. The American movies that the Ministry of Culture purchased and made available to Polish movie-goers usually belonged to the more respected category of “social drama.” When the so-called “cultural policy of the Party” became a thing of the past, when censorship was abolished and the market economy began to operate, the “lower” forms of literature suddenly became available. It was obvious that just as in America or Western Europe, this kind of low-brow culture easily finds its followers.

This new situation proves to be uncomfortable and embarrassing for many critics and social commentators, who once wanted to believe that in Poland low-brow, unambitious culture would never be as popular as it was in the West. They find the present situation very upsetting. They remember fondly the times when serious, ambitious American novels were widely discussed, and when much less-sophisticated texts were simply unavailable, and they mourn this gradual loss of interest among readers in good writing and the absence of serious literary discussions—things that used to involve whole intellectual communities. They regret the disappearance from the streets of Polish cities of fascinating film posters—masterpieces of graphic art—that now have now been replaced with

nondescript, one-size-fits-all posters, often imported, that can be seen anywhere in the world. They complain that the new political system has brought what is often labeled the “Americanization” of Polish culture. The term Americanization—as elsewhere in Europe—is understood to imply a certain lowering of standards, the replacement of high-brow culture or indigenous artistic culture by a popular culture requiring no intellectual background from its consumers.

Such views and sentiments are often referred to by American scholars as elitist, the term being treated not as merely descriptive but rather as evaluative and somewhat accusatory. These sentiments, the longing for the times when high-brow art was much more respected, when showing one’s interest in the artistically refined literary or theatrical productions was something to be proud of, are indeed elitist, except that elitism is not considered in Poland a reason for shame. Attitudes of intellectual elitism, the embracing and celebrating of intellectual superiority, represented a reaction to the Marxist dogmas that claimed that class distinctions should be abolished, and that intellectuals, the working class, and farmers should all have the same interests, tastes, ambitions, and goals. While not rejecting or ignoring the many forms of popular culture that have inundated their country, Polish intellectuals see nothing inappropriate in questioning publicly the merits of *Harlequins*, *Dynasty*, or *Baywatch*. A reader’s curious letter in a recent *New Yorker* underscores my point. The author, speaking “on behalf of normal moviegoers,” accuses the magazine’s film reviewer of *The Phantom Menace* of being “stereotypically elitist.” For many Poles such a critique smacks too much of party line critique of elitism from the 1950s or 1960s and can hardly be treated with sympathy or understanding.

The new situation offers many concerns and challenges for teachers of American literature and culture too. The current swelling enrollment in English departments in no way suggests a growing interest in Anglo-Saxon culture. It has a strictly practical background—the growing demand for teachers, interpreters, and translators of English. In my own teaching I can no longer take for granted my students’ interest in American fiction or poetry. While their tastes are usually more educated than those of the general consumer, they no longer think it is their duty as students of English to know what is going on in high-brow American literature and culture. I also cannot take for granted my students’ interest and sympathy for America. Many of them, quite often those who have been to the United States, do not declare this kind of interest, while others often become mildly anti-American, accusing the United States of “polluting” the world with its popular culture. For my students in the 1990s, America is not so much the country of cultural experimentation, the country of refreshing ideas and original art, but more and more often the country of embarrassing daytime talk shows, soap operas, and trashy TV series for teenagers. It often happens that some of them still question the relevance of including discussions of popular culture elements in their courses, suspecting that the teacher who talks about romances, horror movies, or hip-hop is merely trying to be trendy, or that he is not competent

enough to deal with “sophisticated” texts and movies. Paradoxically, the young consumers of popular culture products feel that what they consume is not deserving of serious scholarly attention. Because of that change, teaching American literature and culture in Poland is a much more complex enterprise than it was in the 1970s or 1980s. Dealing with skeptics rather than enthusiasts creates an entirely new, sometimes frustrating, but often very exciting, situation in the classroom.

The present change in the reception of American literature and culture in Poland is, I hope, only temporary. Though there will always be a demand for commercial, sensational, and even trashy writing, many hope that one day, when Poland’s economic situation improves, publishers will realize that it is also possible to make some profit on a quality product. Perhaps one day the government will discover that it has enough funds to resume sponsoring all kinds of non-commercial cultural projects.

Even then, however, high-brow American literature will probably not enjoy the same kind of popularity it used to enjoy under Communism. With all the political changes in Europe, reading American texts has lost its prior political significance and is no longer considered a political statement. Entering the complex and varied world of American fiction is no longer a way to escape drab, Communist reality, which now, luckily, belongs to past.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jan Blonski “Americans in Poland” *The Kenyon Review*, Winter 1961, 23: 39.
2. *Polityka*, 12 (March 20, 1999).
3. *Nowe Książki* 17 (1975), 19-21.
4. Allen Ginsberg *Znajomi z tego świata*, ed. Piotr Sommer (Krakow, 1993).
5. The editor did not get a single penny—the Catholics did not pay him, nor did the new, little-known publisher.