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The Polish Trial of Kafka. On the Reception of Franz Kafka and So-Called “Dark Literature” by the Censorship Board¹

This study is devoted to the censors’ reception to the output of Franz Kafka and other authors from the late-1950s considered as representatives of so-called “dark literature”, i.e. Camus, Sartre, and Faulkner. The archival material on which I based my analyses, though incomplete (because of the random nature of archival findings), cast some light on certain mechanisms of how censorship operated in the second half of the 1950s and enable a broader view of the literary life of that time. The category of “dark literature”, **purely historical today, should be considered as superficial and cognitively vapid**; however, it cannot be omitted when attempting to reconstruct the cultural life of that time.

Until 1956, the only Polish book edition of Kafka’s works was *Trial* translated by Józefina Szelińska (sometimes ascribed to Bruno Schulz) in 1935. The years immediately after WWII did not bring any new translations or significant studies and only infrequent and scattered press notes about the writer². Two larger articles by Sandauer, published in *Odrodzenie* in 1946, stood out. He presented Kafka as a representative of “mystical realism” and discussed Western, mainly French, “dark literature” associated with existentialism³.

During the Socialist realism period it was obviously out of the question to publish Kafka’s works. Dogmatic Marxism treated Kafka, just like Joyce or Proust, as a model example of a writer-decadent; his works were rejected because of the pessimism, anti-rationalism and vapid formalism that were associated with

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² Short mentions of the writer appeared, e.g. in “Znak” (1946, issue 2), “Gazeta Ludowa” (1947, issue 328), “Nowiny Literackie” (1948, issue 36), “Tygodnik Powszechny” (1947, issue 11) and “Odra” (1947, issue 35). I quote this information from Daniel Kalinowski (*Światy Franza Kafki. Sekwencja polska*, Słupsk 2006, p. 122).

³ A. Sandauer, *Literatura fatalistyczna*, “Odrodzenie” 1946, issue 47; idem, *Kierunki literackie we Francji*, “Odrodzenie” 1946, issue 51–52.

them and they were considered a sign of bourgeois moral decay⁴. In Poland, such opinions discrediting the author of *The Castle* (and his posthumous Polish “descendants” of the 1930s) were formulated by, e.g. Adolf Sowiński and Kazimierz Brandys⁵. In the majority of socialist countries the situation finally changed in the early-1960s, partly under the pressure of Jean Paul Sartre, who in 1962 at the international Congress for Peace in Moscow demanded that Kafka should be “legalised”. Another breakthrough was the academic session devoted to the writer held in May 1963 in Czech Libice. It eventually guaranteed that his output be present in the Eastern Bloc countries and though the debate surrounding it never ceased, the top-down “approval of Kafka” was never revoked⁶.

In Poland, Kafka had already received an “introduction to licence” along with other works of so-called “dark literature” in 1956. Fragments of his prose pieces were printed, after undertaking certain precautions⁷, in *Przekrój*, *Twórczość*, *Kierunki*, and *Po prostu*. Soon, the time came for book editions: in 1957, the reissue of *The Trial* and *The Judgment* (a collection of nine stories) were published; in 1958: *The Castle*; in 1959: *Letters to Milena*; in 1961: *Diaries* and *Nowele i miniatury* [Short stories and miniatures]; and in 1967: *Amerika*. Those first editions were accompanied by a vivid debate and the first disputes of interpretation, including attempts at confronting Kafka with the literature and culture of the People’s Republic, which was being designed anew at that time.

The issue of Kafka’s “acceptance” was, at that time, extremely important and it represented numerous other problems influencing the character of the post-thaw socialism. The high hopes regarding the wave of translations of Western literature and the associated anxiety of Marxists kindled at the outset a dispute

⁴ The whole situation was probably largely influenced by the negative evaluation of Kafka’s works formulated by György Lukács, literary historian and critic, who was widely respected and who was not dogmatic (vide G. Lukács, *Opis czy opowiadanie. Przyczynek do dyskusji o naturalizmie i formalizmie* [Narrate or Describe? A preliminary discussion of naturalism and formalism], translated by B. Rafałowska, “Przegląd Humanistyczny” 1959, vol. 4–5). It should be mentioned that in the 1950s in Marxist groups in France there was a fierce debate “should we burn Kafka?” (that was the, quite provocative, title of a survey in *L’Action* weekly) only to, i.a. through the voice of Georges Bataille, “save” him for Marxism.

⁵ Sowiński (*Chwalca minionego czasu*, “Nowa Kultura” 1950) wrote in response to Kisielewki’s article while the article by Brandys (*Odpowiedź wulgaryzatora*, “Kuznica” 1949, issue 42, p. 2) was a response to Sandauer’s article.

⁶ Vide D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁷ According to Kalinowski (*ibidem*, p. 125), the earliest translations of stories – *The Metamorphosis* and the later *In the penal colony* – appeared in “Przekrój” in 1956, though the editorial board added to the first issue a request for the readers to send in their opinions whether Kafka’s stories were fit for serial printing and whether there was any interest in those. The review did describe Kafka’s text as “difficult and symbolic” in a popular weekly, but it was also possible that the reservation and the request addressed to the general public was supposed to serve as a form of political alibi.

over whether Kafka's works should even be printed and if they were worthwhile and whether their reading could be reconciled with socialism. From the very beginning of his presence in Polish culture Kafka had, to some extent, been the subject of various conflicts which extended far outside his works. The attitude towards Kafka, particularly before 1959, revealed, i.a. the ideological disagreements among Polish Marxist critics (the dispute between the dogmatists and revisionists)⁸.

The post-October reception of Kafka was presented in detail by Daniel Kalinowski (to whose findings this study owes much)⁹ which is why I shall not delve into it here. But I shall quote an interesting opinion by Andrzej Wirth which served as the source of the debate, though eccentric and isolated, as it said a lot about the contemporary social, political and cultural landscape. His statement was probably the boldest attempt at inscribing Kafka's works in the Polish reality of the late-1950s and finding a fitting ideological "loophole".

Kafka's Faustus is, for us, and quite unequivocally, a positive character of the "past period", he seeks "socialism which is likeable", not "thanks to" but "against" reality. The search is, just like in real life, tragic and comical at the same time. It is that mad metaphysics of bureaucracy, which Kafka casts over his world, that best describes the atmosphere of the times when personal bonds were threatened utterly [...]. I believe that the Polish audience would read *The Castle* today not metaphysically or religiously, but in that only compelling way: as a reflection of failures, defeats, pride and terror of the time, the meaning of which was revealed by the Polish October. [...] That is art fit for Poland¹⁰.

The revolutionist reading proposed by Wirth (who openly proposed to view *The Castle*'s main protagonist as a model communist) could not expect to be accepted either by critics of Marxism¹¹, or by those who interpreted Kafka along the religious or existentialist lines and it was even rejected through common sense¹².

⁸ Vide ibidem, p. 133.

⁹ This applies mainly to two chapters of his book: *Kafka i polska "odwilż"* [Kafka and the Polish "thaw"] and *Czarny Kafka* [The dark Kafka]. Indirectly, I am also using two other valuable texts on which Kalinowski himself based his statement: by Halina E. Góral (*Recepcja twórczości Franza Kafki w Polsce Ludowej*, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis" XXVI 1976, pp. 141–163) and Janusz Lewoń (*Pożytki ze światłkomet*, "Akcent" 1982, vol. 2, pp. 59–65).

¹⁰ I quote after Kalinowski (*op. cit.*, p. 128).

¹¹ Janusz Wilhelmi blatantly defined Wirth's idea as an attempt to saddle others with the problem. Vide J. Wilhelmi, *Pierwsze koty za płoty*, "Trybuna Literacka" 1959, issue 6.

¹² A critic under the pseudonym of Chochoł (Aleksander Jerzy Wieczorkowski) wrote: "Had Wirth added to the sentence forty-four volumes of in folio explanation (which will probably happen soon either way), that what he meant for was a kind of a parable, metaphor or ellipsis [...] and whole-heartedly assured everyone that he wrote everything for the benefit of our culture, I dare

Wirth's idea did, however, indicate (quite directly) one of the reasons behind *The Trial* and *The Castle*'s connection to every day Polish reality. Undoubtedly the experience of Stalinism, with its bureaucracy, painful absurdity and constant sense of threat, was one of the main causes of the demand for such literature and, at the same time, one of the causes of its superficial and utilitarian (or even obsessive) reception¹³. In a sense, Kafka's return, together with the Theatre of the Absurd and other "dark literature", was the return of what had been ousted; whatever Socialist realism tried so diligently to remove from sight.

The specificity of the Polish reception of Kafka at that time was also determined by the intermediation through the context of French culture¹⁴; mainly through existentialism. The author of *The Trial* was listed as a representative of the "Theatre of the Absurd" together with Sartre, Camus or Beckett as well as, which is much less obvious from today's perspective, Caldwell, Faulkner or Polish authors like Schulz or Gombrowicz. Fiercely debated at that time, the category of "absurd", ambiguous and burdened with moral doubt, was often used as a frame enabling the setting of false relationships, superficial philosophical and artistic ties or defining strong ideological oppositions. The contemporary reception to Kafka in Poland was, thus, encumbered by simplifications, superficial judgments and utilitarian approaches. Many of its features made it similar to a fashion, which was perspicaciously grasped at that time by Artur Międzyrżeczki¹⁵. It was, in fact, the intermediation through French culture but also, to a similarly large extent, the **"café" fashion for literature and philosophical "darkness", operating with emotions and cancelling any significant intellectual differences, that**

say that, apart from some noble intent, the sentence contained pure nonsense" (Chochół, *Ratujmy Kafkę przed egzegezą*, "Współczesność" 1959, issue 8, p. 2).

¹³ That kind of reception was specific for, i.a. commentators of then influential "Współczesność". As Maciej Chrzanowski pointed out the studies published in the journal "discussing such authors as Caldwell, Proust, Kafka, Gide, de Sade, Poe or Beckett usually displayed scanty knowledge of the 20th-century history of literature" (M. Chrzanowski, *Oblicza "Współczesności"*, Warsaw 1987, pp. 167–168. As cited in: D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 142). Obsessive interpretation was discussed by Kijowski in relation to Wirth's interpretation. Vide A. Kijowski. *Polski Kafka*, "Teatr i Film" 1958, issue 1.

¹⁴ The first post-WWII comments and Sandauer's articles immediately established that kind of context for the reception of Kafka's works. Cf. D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁵ In *Moda na Kafkę* [Kafka Fashion] ("Świat" 1957, issue 43) Artur Międzyrżeczki stated: "And yet the today's Kafka fashion, its café literariness and snobbish superficiality, is actually a surprising and in no way unequivocal phenomenon. It, for example, identifies the exceptional quality of the author's imagination and praises it for reasons which, generally speaking, resemble the considerations because of which a similar fashion displayed its recognition of Chagall's paintings. The world constructed through imagination, the result and the culmination of the act of creation of an unparalleled strength, the complete structure of *The Trial* and *The Castle* remain in the shadow. It is also difficult not to entertain the thought that by praising the talent and lamenting the torments of the author's desolation people have dispatched him, just in case, to the academic pantheon from which no one will ever have to be haunted by the unique account of evil on the human land, of anxiety, sorrow and extermination" (cited after: D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 127).

was responsible for, not completely unjustified but hastily nonetheless, tossing Kafka into the (brimming) container of existentialists¹⁶.

By contrast, the significance of Kafka for young writers of that time was indicated by a somewhat cutting remark by Jan Błoński, who concluded: “Answers to a survey sent out to young writers regarding their favourite authors listed all the greatest names, the inspirations of the 20th century. No one went lower than Kafka, Beckett or Faulkner... Sartre is liked no more, Mann is nowhere to be seen”¹⁷. Even though Kafkaesque influences, motifs and “moods” were often being traced but could not be found, it is certain that **“Kafka” became one of the most significant points of reference of that time.** “Kafka” was considered broadly: as a certain literary and biographical phenomenon, as a figure of tragic fate, a literary and existential legend¹⁸. The author’s work, because of its autotelic nature (setting one’s own rules of interpretation), the ability to provoke various interpretations coupled with its immunity to any of those (as Adorno noted: Kafka’s work is a “parable the key to which had been stolen”¹⁹), in time became a type of projection screen for the interpreters of various schools and orientations worldwide enabling various kinds of abuse. This also applied to the post-October Poland. Kafka’s work also left, apparently, a considerable freedom of interpretation.

The shape of reception of Kafka and the “dark literature”, reconstructed in detail by researchers, should be supplemented by one minute, though essential and previously unknown element: a short censor’s review of Kafka’s works. In GUKPPiW (Main Office of Control of Press, Publications and Shows) there survived, i.a. a hand-written review of *The Trial*, which was reissued in 1957. It was created on 21 May 1957 and signed by censor Jarecka:

The Trial is a typical example of Franz Kafka’s output, which is extremely popular but difficult to classify under any specific genre. In my opinion, *The Trial* is a typically psychological novel, the plot of which is limited to the feelings of a person who was

¹⁶ Such commentators as Zbigniew Bienkowski protested against such an association (*Camus anty-Kafka*, in: idem, *W skali wyobraźni. Szkice wybrane*, Warsaw 1983, p. 239–253). Vide: T. Mackiewicz. *Kafka a filozofia absurdu*, in: *Poetyka egzystencji. Franz Kafka*, E. Kasperski (ed.), T. Mackiewicz (cooperation), Warsaw 2004, pp. 295–306.

¹⁷ J. Błoński. *Zmiana warty*, in: idem, *Odmarsz*, Cracow 1978, p. 17 (first printing: *Zmiana warty*, Cracow 1961).

¹⁸ It is best exemplified by works for which Kafka himself was an inspiration, i.e. works by such renowned writers as Stanisław Grochowiak (*Franz Kafka*), Rafał Wojaczek (poems: *Ja, Kafka* and *Wyrok*) or Tadeusz Różewicz (plays *Pułapka* and *Odejskie głodomora*), to name but a few major authors and works directly referring to Kafka’s work.

¹⁹ Vide T.W. Adorno, *Zapiski o Kafce* [Notes on Kafka], translated by A. Wołkiewicz, in: *Nienasylenie. Filozofowie o Kafce*, Ł. Musiał, A. Żychliński (eds.), Cracow 2011, p. 131. Adorno also claimed that the parabolic nature “expresses itself not through expression but by its repudiation, by breaking off” (ibidem).

arrested but not imprisoned. He considers himself innocent, throughout the story strives to find the reason for his arrest. Eventually, without ever finding out the truth, he dies. It is only having read the book that one realises that the title does not denote a court trial, as one might expect after reading the initial chapters. *The Trial* rather stands for specific human relations which are committed for trial. That train of thought leads to death, which he views objectively and accepts quietly, though he never learns why everything happened the way it did. It is a peculiar type of fatalism, a progressing paralysis of human will which overwhelms the reader. Nonetheless, Kafka's novel is extremely interesting. Beautiful style, though as if mathematically perfected. The book was re-issued²⁰.

The conclusion: *grant the permit* was approved on 23 May 1957 (confirmation was recorded on the same card in different pen). The novel was printed by PIW in the number of 20,000 + 253 copies.

In the same year, the Chief Bureau received a request for a permit to publish a collection of stories entitled *The Judgment* translated by Juliusz Kydryński. The censor evaluation was signed on 12 April 1957 by Maria Szymańska.

It is a set of a few stories by Kafka and the title *The Judgment* was taken from the first, probably the best known, one. The body of Kafka's stories consists of extraordinary, unbelievable even people's fortunes. The writer almost always introduces, apart from regular characters and events, absurd and paradox to emphasise or even exaggerate human nature and motivations. In *In the penal colony*, he expressed a deep protest against terror, against non-humanitarian, inhumane penalties used by people. I have no reservations²¹.

The censor's supervisor approved the publication on 13 June 1957. Less than a year later, on 19 March 1958, the censorship bureau issued a permit for the publication in *Czytelnik* the writer's last novel. *The Castle* was evaluated by Renata Świątycka:

Huge, near empty village covered with snow with a castle on a hill towering over it which actually is not a castle, to which no road leads, to which no one from the village has ever been. This is the setting of the novel's plot. K., supposedly a surveyor, who comes to the village attempts and fails to reach the castle; his motivation remains unknown. Access to it is guarded by a huge army of busy office workers, who, in reality, are doing nothing – and piles of files, completely meaningless. In the afterword to *The Castle* Karst concluded that no one knows what Kafka wanted to say through his

²⁰ AAN (Archives of New Records). GUKPPiW, ref. no. 426 (34/3), l. 317.

²¹ Ibidem, l. 283.

novel. I personally see it as a biting irony targeted at the state machine, and the human society in general. Human life seems full of absurd and fiction at the same time as no one or nothing forces the supposed surveyor and the people in the village to submit to the castle, nothing forces the surveyor to strive to reach the castle²².

Several issues in the quoted reviews deserve careful consideration. First, the censors noted the extraordinary nature, the overwhelming sorrow of the works. It was a censorship standard in relation to all “pessimistic” literary works, that, though rather naive, the mode of reception did not diverge much from the contemporary, not only non-academic, reading focusing on such qualities as the tragic nature and claustrophobic mood. What is interesting, successive officers of the Chief Control Bureau of Press (GUKP) did not evaluate the pessimism negatively but they did when evaluating books.

Secondly, they offered an approach to reading Kafka’s works through the prism of humanism (understood mainly as humanitarianism). That reading key was used quite often in official discussions of “progressive” Western literature, i.e. that which could at least be slightly aligned with the ideals of socialism. When reviewing in the late-1950s the works of Eric Remarque, Stefan Zweig or Lion Feuchtwanger, GUKP officials emphasised their humanist content and the anti-fascist or anti-imperialist reading and educational qualities²³. Censors also were able to easily find strong ideological foundations in order to “**release for publication**” such writers as Caldwell and Faulkner, who were also associated with “dark literature”. All it took was to shift the centre of gravity of their “pessimism” to the, obviously unquestionable, elements of criticism of American society (racism, severe differences in quality of life, hypocrisy). I would like to use as an example a fragment of a review of *Sanctuary* published in 1957 by PIW:

²² Ibidem, ref. no. 596 (68/2), l. 354–355.

²³ A preserved review (of 26 January 1956) of *The Pretender* by Feuchtwanger read: “The plot of Feuchtwanger’s historical novel refers to the turn of the 2nd century A.D. and is set in Asia Minor, within the borders of the Roman province of Syria and the neighbouring independent Arab and Seleucid minor principalities. However, the specific and historically accurate location and course of action should not cloud the actual idea behind the novel. In the short introduction the editors aptly indicate that ‘according to Feuchtwanger’s own words, the technique of a historical novel is used by him to paint as accurately as possible the contemporary reality by placing contemporary content within the framework of a historical story’” (ibidem, ref. no. 434 (31/36), l. 45–46). Then, in a review (of 16 March 1957) of a novel by Stefan Zweig entitled *The Story of Magellan* the censor emphasised its educational qualities: “**I believe this book to be a truly interesting and beneficial read which is why it can safely be recommended for the youth. It includes many educational qualities: it promotes gallantry, courage, justice, honesty, it familiarises the reader with the history of that period and it teaches geography. Finally, in the book the author argues that the notion of man fostered by his will and resilience proves stronger than the elements that one solitary man can turn the dreams of generations into reality and everlasting truth**” (ibidem, ref. no. 426 (34/4), l. 349–350).

Faulkner's novel, the story of which takes place in the State of Mississippi, USA, fulfils a denouncing function. Not only the facts presented in the book, which alone constitute sufficient "aggravating" material, but also its artistic qualities, the style, the language, the imagery introduce the reader to that peculiar atmosphere of the "American way of life" in the version specific of the more backward areas. It is an atmosphere of crime, beastliness, sexual deviation, incredible drunkenness in the "underground" [...] **on the one hand and bribery, hypocrisy, pursuit for money, cruelty, thoughtlessness and terrific indifference to injustice on the other, i.e. among the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia.** Thus presents itself, as the author describes it, the "dominant morality" of that society. [...] **The book is filled with pessimism. The author sees no force that could change the existing human relations.**

Irrespective of its obvious pessimism, Faulkner's novel received the censor's approval and, on top of that, was recommended as the perfect cure for the too extensive revisionist tendencies:

Even though Faulkner's novel ought not be treated as a complete representation of the social relations within the described area (e.g. there is not a single worker character), let alone the image of life in the USA in general (southern states are backward areas), the book does present the fundamental elements of bourgeois morality. The publication of the book would seem to me fitting for our times very well. Additionally, for those who in the period of renewal of our moral life seek classical role models in the West, Faulkner's book is the proverbial bucket of ice-cold water on your head to curb your enthusiasm. It makes you consider whether those "obsolete forms" can still serve as role models. I hold reservations towards some fragments for the presented in them "representations of morality" (pp. 217–221) and (240–242). Though I do not express my opinion about them, I consider it to be my censorship responsibility to direct the management's attention to the a/m fragments²⁴.

The positive evaluation was, in that case, well justified and the only stain on the novel was its pessimism (considering the American reality it was not associated with the critical evaluation of the reality but a lack of conviction about the possibility of a social change), though even it became somewhat justified.

The novels by Feuchtwanger, Zweig or Faulkner were immersed in specific social, political and historical realities. Kafka's prose works, of course, cannot be read with a similar key. Nonetheless, they were somewhat included in the category of "humanism", which, though completely simplifying them and quashing their entire parabolic ambiguity, did make it possible to tame them and diminish

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 251–252.

their “inhuman” dimension, which a few years earlier would most definitely had been considered as a sign of bourgeois decadence.

The thorough attempt at juxtaposing the vision of the reality presented in *The Castle* and *The Trial* and the state ideology (even in its Thaw version) would have revealed a deep discrepancy between them. By persistently seeking in Kafka a “positive” satirist/mocker, a critic of the society and striving to find a conciliatory space within the most broadly understood “humanism”, censorship officers tried to safely avoid the problem, while at the same time neutralising any possibility of generalised anti-totalitarian, and in turn anti-Stalinist, reading (the mentioned article by Wirth being one of such)²⁵ or even an anti-communist reading in general²⁶.

When one compares the quoted reviews with other censorship documents what is striking is their superficiality (they were more of short impressions than well-argued political or critical reviews) as well as their factual, virtually non-ideological neutral-descriptive tone. No attempt at confronting the meaning of *The Trial* and *The Castle* with the standing ideology had been made; there wasn't even a rudimentary consideration of the potential political or educational detriment of the literature. The fact that censorship officers, just like contemporary critics²⁷, treated Kafka already as a classic seems interesting.

Moreover, no anti-formalist motifs appeared in the reviews²⁸. The minor remark about *The Trial*'s near “mathematical” precision was formulated within the

²⁵ Zbigniew Bieńkowski stated: “In *The Castle* the author presents a subtle almost elusive mechanism of moral oppression operating according to the latest formula. It is an annihilation method while preserving all pretences, painless, which does not leave any trace. Since Kafka's times, the world has made much progress in improving it. We are aware, we know the victims that died with tears of gratitude. Kafka showed it using the example of K”. (Z. Bieńkowski, *Kafka, piekło metafizyki*, “Twórczość” 1958, issue 1, p. 93). Julian Stawiński concluded that in *In the penal colony* the author depicted “the entire psychological mechanism of Nazism” (J. Stawiński, *Sprawozdanie z ludzkiego absurdu*, “Nowe Książki” 1957, issue 20, p. 1221).

²⁶ According to the (biased) account by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, such anxiety was supposedly expressed directly during the above-mentioned international conference in Libice near Prague. Grudziński claimed that the conference organiser was encouraging socialist countries to accept Kafka with the reservation that the responsibility of Marxist critics was “to ensure that even in the gloomiest of minds there would not appear an analogy between our authorities and the Kafkaesque vision of bureaucratic harassment and cruelty” (G. Herling-Grudziński, *Kafka w Rosji*, in: idem, *Upiory rewolucji...*, Z. Kudelski (ed.), Lublin 1992, p. 49. As cited in: D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 136).

²⁷ Vide D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

²⁸ It is worth remembering at this point that the virtually unlimited scope of poetic freedom and the waived interventions in the formal and literary issues began at the time of the October turning point. Before that, in the period of the most severe rigorism, the job of bureau officers was to seek out not only specific content but also excessively complex poetics and eliminating any traces of “formalism”. Vide K. Budrowska, *Literatura i pisarze wobec cenzury PRL 1948–1958*, Białystok 2009, p. 64. The first editions of Kafka's works were published during the peak of censorship liberalisation. As Budrowska noted it lasted from October 1956 until October 1957, “though it was not a complete ‘censorshipless’, rather a less in-depth control than before” (ibidem, p. 11). And yet censors did not return to verifying formal-literary matters upon the re-tightening of the trend in the cultural policy, i.e. after 1958.

framework of aesthetics, as a part of an approving remark on the beauty of the style (which seems to had been borrowed from the editorial afterword). Of course, the quoted reviews remain fundamentally anti-formalist in the sense that they were maintained within the lines of realist and psychological categories, they reduced the logic specific for the work to “peculiarity” and omitted its integral literariness. But, as I have mentioned before, it was a more general rule. The literariness of Kafka’s work was gradually becoming valued, after the first wave of biographical, quasi-existentialist and religious interpretations had passed.

One might assume that the monolith of *The Trial* or *The Castle*, as well as the writer’s entire output, could not be fragmented and divided into approved and censored elements. It could only either be accepted or rejected as a whole. Minor interventions would not be able to diminish its intrinsic, potentially dangerous intellectual and emotional content. Thus, it seems that censors did not have much to do there. Everything depended on the pre-established scope of tolerance and the pre-accepted reading key.

This might indicate that the “**case of Kafka**” for the approval and final publication of his works after 1957 was in Poland s was made at a higher level so that any possible censor reservations could not alter that decision. It is possible that censors’ reviews were nothing more than a formality. The fact that such situations occurred at the Chief Bureau was confirmed by the review of the first edition of a novel by Beckett, a writer who was similarly anxiously anticipated by readers and just as potentially “dangerous”. The author of *Molloy* apparently received a similar free pass, which protected him from censor’s accusations of pornography and nihilism²⁹.

A similar situation occurred in the case of *Existentialism is a Humanism* by Jean Paul Sartre. The censor considered its philosophical and political meaning seeking inconsistent and tried, as much as possible in the brief and temporary form of an official review, to confront it with the philosophical principles of Marxism:

²⁹ The censor was extremely laconic in evaluating Beckett’s prose: “Item of low value. Focus of attention is placed on an asocial individual: a beggar. Melancholic deliberations marked with dejection and mockery towards the surrounding world. It is difficult to find positivism in the novel. In some instances, the descriptions are disgusting – pornographic. Considering the fact that the item is of low value and, on top of that, translated from the French, I believe (irrespective of possible interventions) that it would be advisable not to print it. (A waste of paper and money.) [...] Suggested interventions with short justifications: pp. 54, 90, 91, 96, 98. Pornography” (AAN, GUKPPiW, ref. no. 596 (68/2), l. 336). The evaluation, dated 7 March 1958, concluded with a list of suggested interventions. A note by Strasser, director of the Bureau, both confirmed the validity of the censor’s reservations and completely overturned them: “On 27 Mar, the Central Committee (KC) discussed the case of publishing Beckett. [...] GUKP reservations were legitimate. However, considering the fact that we support the release of major directions of literary works to the readers and that the number of copies is low – grant the approval” (ibidem, l. 337).

One could [...] agree with many assumptions made by Sartre, one might even take them to heart because it is truly, in my opinion, a philosophy of action, a philosophy with man as its subject, an optimistic philosophy. Problems arise when one proceeds to the second part of Sartre's *Marxism and Existentialism*. It offers what is often referred to as a revision of Marxism.

Sartre poses that existentialism developed at the periphery of Marxism, not in opposition to it. He acknowledges Marx's philosophy accepting a lot of his arguments. Marxism, he wrote, [...] could not completely satisfy our need for understanding the world as it locked itself in one place, it turned into solidified idealism. It is the biggest accusation posed by Sartre against Marxism. [...] The following consists of a criticism of Marxism, its fossilisation, dogmatism, denial of facts, and falsification of history. The author disputed the Stalinist system throwing some harsh words against it. [...] It is all about giving succour to the inefficient Marxism, Sartre wrote. Marxism must cleanse and renew itself, become once more a philosophy of our times and at that point existentialism will lose its *raison d'être*. In general terms, Sartre's philosophy is convincing. One can disagree with some of the ideas which might seem inconsistent. Maybe because they were presented in a summary form and their meaning has been misperceived. However, the general tone of the work and the principles included in it force the reader to consider that we might be dealing with an ally. We must ask ourselves whether the ally is currently helping or harming us³⁰.

Finally, the censor pointed out the small number of copies (5,000) and the specialist character of the book and motioned for it to be released for publication. That attempt at ideological confrontation, undoubtedly one of the major tasks of censorship officers, was, in that case, completely disregarded by the censor's supervisor who in an a-few-sentence-long note on the review, quite disrespectful in its tone (and extremely colloquial), dismissed the reservations and settled any doubts for the benefit of the French philosopher, probably according to a decision made at a higher level:

The inconsistency that the author of the review accused Sartre of (sic!) may just as well be assigned to the reviewer because comrade Stankiewicz agreed with the philosophy of existentialism – because it is a philosophy of action, an optimistic philosophy, only to fall into conflict when confronting it with Marxism. So what is the essence of Sartre's revisionism – **something doesn't play out here. And the suggestion to print is fine**³¹.

³⁰ Ibidem, ref. no. 426 (34/4), l. 224–225 (a review by Henryka Stankiewicz of 19 October 1957, WUKPPIW in Łódź).

³¹ Ibidem.

It is difficult to draw any absolute conclusions in this case but it seems that in the above-mentioned instances the censors' opinions lacked any moving force from the beginning. The decisions to publish authors so significant for contemporary literary and philosophical landscape as Sartre, Beckett or Kafka were apparently made at a higher level and they were the result of more general factors of the contemporary political and cultural situation. Then, an ordinary censor was placed in a situation where he/she not so much issued an evaluation, as he/she had to guess what the "proper" evaluation should be. The eventual question in the quoted review ("whether the ally is currently helping or harming us?") directed at the "higher level" seems to confirm that³². One might surmise that such situations occurred quite often in 1957, i.e. in the period of the biggest liberalisation of censorship, when the principles of control and the scope of freedom of speech fluctuated and formed anew.

The censor's noticeable approval or, in any case, sympathy as an interpretative principle seeking common areas rather than areas of conflict was particularly striking when juxtaposed with the official tone of the evaluations issued before the October breakthrough. At this point it seems valuable to recall the censor's comment to *The Stranger* by Albert Camus of 1948. The GUKP officer stated that the book contained the "entire meaning and essence" of existentialism and attempted a short reconstruction of the principles of that philosophy. The review, rejecting the novel's application for publication, concluded as follows: "Not only does the entire book require interventions but also the entire philosophical system together with its creators"³³. The difference between that statement and the censor evaluation formulated after 1956 about the works by Camus, Kafka and Sartre may be considered as a measure of the changes brought about by the "Polish October"³⁴.

The liberal nature of censors' decisions might also come as a surprise when it is juxtaposed with the opinions formulated by party Marxists after the turning

³² Of course, by displaying excessive vigilance the censor did not risk much, he/she could be reproved for the so-called "censor nosiness" at the most.

³³ Review of 17.01.1948. As cited in: D. Jarosz, *Zapisy cenzury z lat 1948–1955*, "Regiony" 1996, issue 3, p. 12. According to Mariusz Zawodniak the halting of the print of a fragment of *The Stranger* in "Kuźnica" in 1948 was associated with an extensive attack on existentialism, including on what was viewed as the Polish version of it, i.e. the works by Borowski and Nałkowska. I am referring to a paper entitled *Cenzura a tużpowojenne życie literackie. Kilka kontekstów, kilka przykładów* [Censorship and the post-WWII literary life. A few contexts, a few examples] delivered during a conference entitled "Literatura w granicach prawa (XIX–XX w.)" [Literature within the legal framework (19th–20th c.)] held on 18–19.04.2013 in Białystok. The paper will be published in a post-conference volume.

³⁴ *The Stranger* was eventually published in 1958 by PIW. Censorship documents also include an evaluation of Camus' collection entitled *Exile and the Kingdom* (review by Renata Świątycka of 7.01.1958) which maintained a completely approving tone. The book could expect to be favoured considering its anti-colonialist reading and social engagement. Vide AAN, GUKPPiW, ref. no. 426 (34/3), l. 42/279.

point in 1956. A representative example of that offered the declaration made by Zbigniew Słojewski, who in 1958 in *Współczesność* condemned pessimism and the universalist claims of the prose works of Kafka, Sartre or Camus (in line with the contemporary trend to lump those three authors together). Słojewski spoke on behalf of the “normal” reader, using a normative tone, thus emphasising the sickness in the world-view and aesthetic attitude of the writer:

That skinny lunger was not able to see beyond his spittoon, and yet how madly grand were his ambitions and how grotesquely huge was his egoism. [...] Only the jealousy of a lunger made him write all the mad ideas pointlessly. [...] The reader does not want that, it is alien to him, he wants life. [...] The edibility of foods with which they try to feed the reader are being refused, disapproval and disgust is expressed towards the dispassionate asexual style which they use to talk about life and the world³⁵.

Censors’ reviews, when compared to the quoted evaluations, seem friendly and completely void of dogmatism. However, there is no internal inconsistency within the system: the times of ideological radicalism and perfect cohesion had passed while the fact of granting Western literature, including the ideologically dubious, the right to exist did not necessarily have to mean ideological approval. As Mariusz Zawodniak argued, in Socialist realism control functions were mainly fulfilled by critics which might indicate a censorship model of literary criticism³⁶. Similarly after 1956, though on a smaller scale and with a less direct result, the statements of critics associated with the Party fulfilled those type of control functions. Censors, in turn, though having a direct influence on publishing decisions, enjoyed a different status: their opinions were much more pragmatic while their ideological autonomy was lower.

Since 1957 and after March 1959 in particular, within the framework of the “fight with revisionism”, the authorities limited the tolerance towards “dark literature”. During the 3rd convention of PZPR it was personally condemned by Władysław Gomułka (in a speech re-printed under the title of “Chcemy literatury służącej życiu” [We want literature that serves our lives]):

Then why many contemporary writers and other creators have for so long wandered to ideological crossroads and have been losing their ties to the leading socialist forces

³⁵ J.Z. Słojewski, *Wychyleni w stronę śmierci*, “Współczesność” 1958, issue 25, p. 4, 6. As cited in: D. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 128. Statements by some independent critics maintained similar tone. One of them concluded that “Kafka was, in fact, crazy, more precisely: a schizophrenic”... (J. Stadnicki, *Wariackie papiery*, “Prawo i Życie” 1959, issue 1, p. 5). Vide also an anonymous article fiercely criticising the fact of publishing Kafka: P., *Dla kogo?*, “Sztandar Młodych” 1956, issue 168, p. 4.

³⁶ Vide the previously quoted paper by Zawodniak; cf. footnote no. 33.

of the nation? It is caused by revisionist and bourgeois-liberal political tendencies. Because of them there has been created a number of works of detrimental ideological meaning. A dark literature has been created which promotes despair and weakness in man, works which smear socialism and idealise its enemies. We have refused and we will continue to refuse to publish such works as they do not constitute works of art but weapons of political propaganda of anti-socialist forces. [...] Revisionists accuse us that we do not want lacquer art. On the contrary. [...] The truth about socialism is sufficiently optimistic on its own. All you need to do is to view reality through the eyes of the driving forces of the nation, not through the eyes of snobs and bourgeois criticsers of socialism³⁷.

It is symptomatic that in the same issue of *Trybuna Literacka* next to the text of Gomułka's speech announcing that revisionism shall be dealt with also included a text by Zygmunt Kałużyński about the "case of Kafka", which was probably an expression of the official stance of the Party on Kafka. In many instances it proved to be aligned with the earlier censor reading (though, with a visible previously mentioned difference in interpretation and ideological freedom):

Therefore, Kafka is an outstanding metaphysical writer and only because of that can he be interesting to us. Obviously Kafka can also be interpreted differently, e.g. as a satire against the absurd totalitarian bureaucracy; that has been attempted. We currently have the Wirthian proposal for seeing in the protagonist of *The Castle* an idealist-communist fighting for the difficult social ideal. That interpretation, however, visibly deforms Kafka: his theme is the issue of the Man – God relationship and it can only be omitted through intense pretending and persuasion. And the trick also proves unnecessary. [...]...there must be a place for Kafka in our culture which is broadening its horizons. Anyone who has studied metaphysical obsessions in the contemporary society [...] cannot cope without Kafka. Not to mention the beauty of his literature and the humanist value it carries³⁸.

In a contemptuous manner Kałużyński tackled both pro and anti-socialist interpretations of Kafka and reserved for him a safe place in the zone of metaphysics, in the pantheon of "humanistic values". He concluded by protesting against the Wirthian attempt at a deeper integration of Kafka's works with socialism and expressed directly the pragmatic principle which, it seems, will serve as the basis for further "consent for Kafka" on the part of the authorities: "At this point it seems fit to use the 'Polianthes tuberosa principle'. That is a term from

³⁷ The speech was printed in, i.a. "Nowe Drogi" (1959, issue 4) and "Trybuna Literacka" (1959, issue 11).

³⁸ Z. Kałużyński, *Przemysłnictwo? Owszem, ale innym wąwozem! (Z dziejów mitologii społecznych)*, "Trybuna Literacka" 1959, issue 11, p. 535.

Żeromski. He stated that the Polianthes flower is not useful for the worker in any way – but does he because of that stomp on it with the heel of his boot?”³⁹

Kałużyński’s text seemed to explain why the “re-tightening of the policy” after 1959 did not alter in any major way the situation of Kafka’s output and Western literature (in 1959, *Letters to Milena* was published and two years later: *Diaries* and *Nowele i miniatury*). From the point of view of the authorities, including the Chief Control Bureau, what was important, apart from his presence in the official circulation, was also what could be said **about** the work and even more so **in association with** the work in relation to Polish reality. In fact, the procedure of censoring literature, particularly that which was not associated with the situation of the PRL or detached from any specific social and political reality, was not so much (not only) about approving or halting specific works of literature but controlling their reading and neutralising any potential revolutionary interpretations. Thus, the forewords and afterwords to Polish editions were just as significant if not more significant than the actual content of a given work. *The Trial*, the first to be published (and treated as the most important work by Kafka), included a brief foreword “From the editors”, which used a specific “taming” trick: it referred to the documented social sensitivity of the author, though it had absolutely no relation to the work itself. I quote the very beginning of the foreword:

Franz Kafka, throughout his life and his output, was a strange and extraordinary figure and the fortunes of his writing heritage were no less exceptional. He was born in Prague, he spent there the majority of his years working as an official of the state worker insurance company. He knew the world of Austrian bureaucracy up close, he experienced the contemporary labour from the inside. He even devised plans of social reform and in one of those he wrote about “the labour life as a matter of conscience and faith in fellow humans”. He was also amazed by workers’ patience: “How humble those people are! They come and ask us! Instead of launching an attack on the enterprise and smash everything, they come and ask”. **But it was not the social problem that became the focus of his interest.** Nor, apparently, did literature⁴⁰.

He went on to talk about Kafka as a tireless radical seeker of truth, about the stylistic mastery and the mathematical precision of his works, about the multitude of its possible meanings (including “Marxist interpretation attempts”) only to then transfix him in the role of a classic-moral philosopher:

One thing is certain: with the publication of *The Trial*, the 20th century literature and literature in general have gained a grand artist, a master of words and one of

³⁹ Ibidem

⁴⁰ *Od redakcji*, in: F. Kafka, *Proces*, translated by B. Schulz, Warsaw 1957, p. 251.

the greatest moral philosophers with such severe authority and uncompromising maximalism that to find someone equal to him one would have to, according to some critics, reach all the way back to Dante⁴¹.

The concise panegyric in honour of the *grand writer*, putting aside any detailed interpretation, fit the poetics of a publishing commentary perfectly but probably had an additional objective. As long as the initial reference to the social sensitivity of the author of *The Castle* (and, in turn, the reference to his “strangeness”) **would provide a type of political alibi for him, the final resolution was supposed to guarantee the status of a universal writer for him and assign him a place above any social and political conflicts of the epoch.**

That type of “humanistic” **but at the same time “bronzing” reading, assigning** Kafka the status of a classic, was practised by critics of various world-views who represented various ideological and social interests. They used somewhat similar interpretative tactics aimed at ensuring Kafka a secure place in Polish culture. Thus, for example, the previously quoted independent critic who wrote under the pseudonym of Chochoł evaluated Wirth’s concept as absurd (and noted, with astonishment, his agreement with Kałużyński) and concluded that “all it takes to assign him a place on the shelves of our libraries is to acknowledge his humanism”...⁴² Wirth’s idea – bold, eccentric, surely strategically calculated and yet exaggerated in a sense, reconciled the opponents and helped devise a model of reading that could be accepted by various sides of the dispute on Kafka.

It is worth mentioning that the commentaries attached to the following first editions: the foreword by Roman Karst to *The Castle* and to *Nowele i miniatury* and by Zbigniew Bieńkowski to *Letters to Milena* (Krakow, 1959, translated by F. Konopka) were already free of any “strategic” elements, they went deeper into the world of his works utilising at ease, i.e. Freudian and quasi-metaphysical categories.

One of the most valuable and skilful advocates in the Polish “trial” of Kafka was Roman Karst, a loyal translator, commentator and defender, at that time still a member of the Party (often trying to mediate between the Party and “revisionists”). His foreword skilfully avoided any shoals by finding an interpretative path which enabled him to “smuggle”⁴³ the work of the author of *The Judgment* but did not force a reconciliation of its meaning with communism. It skilfully popularised but did not seal him in empty lofty statements and did justice to purely literary qualities⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 253.

⁴² Chochoł [A.J. Wiczorkowski], *op. cit.*, “Współczesność” 1959, issue 8, p. 2.

⁴³ The term “ideological smuggling” was coined in 1953 by Jerzy Putrament to combat aestheticising tendencies of contemporary art.

⁴⁴ Karst prepared, i.a. the first more serious comprehensive literary research work (of a familiarising nature): *Drogi samotności. Rzecz o Franzu Kafce* [Paths of solitude. On Franz Kafka]

At the same time, the censorship bureau analysed more closely the local “dark literature”, which in an obvious way was related to Polish reality. In censorship reviews on Polish works created at the turn of the 1960s censors diligently recorded all instances of pessimism and criticism, with a distinction between politically detrimental and harmless pessimism, insignificant existential pessimism and metaphysical pessimism, not aimed against the foundations of the current political system. Censor notes often included some regrets, sometimes delivered in a didactic or somewhat indulgent tone, about the “trend” of existential doubt, despair, etc.

The quoted censors’ reviews defined a broader phenomenon: the special flexibility of contemporary interpretative rules, fluctuations in the criteria used for evaluating literature (as well as other elements of social life) by decision-makers, Party critics and censors alike. To quote John Bates, one could use the distinction between “doctrine-based assumptions” and “operating ideology”⁴⁵. According to Bates, during the Stalinist period GUKP “grinding” a work according to criteria which oftentimes were mutually exclusive⁴⁶. The fluctuations in the criteria that were used (the pragmatic selection of some or other elements of the doctrine currently in force), which served as a proof of inconsistency or “hypocrisy” of the system or was rather a result of clashing positions, is perfectly visible in censors’ reviews and remains a permanent element of the ideology of the PRL. That instability and changeability of rules in 1956–1959 certainly contributed to the liberalisation of cultural life. The contemporary reception of Kafka, which mainly consisted of seeking gaps and “legal loopholes” ensuring him the right to remain in PRL, seemed a perfect example of that.

(1960). In the extensive sixteen-page-long foreword to *The Castle* Karst professionally and without unnecessary tricks for taming the “strange” and extraordinary nature of the writing, introduced the readers to the artistic and intellectual world of Kafka. He also emphasised the importance of negation as a force driving his works. He concurrently questioned the validity of religious exegesis (by Max Brod, Fürst and Rochefort) and nullified all other enclosing, i.e. reductive interpretations as well. He did, however, emphasise the ethical maximalism, the unwavering pursuit of the goal and the principle of “absolute responsibility” established by Kafka. He also repealed the falsely posed problem of “pessimism vs. optimism” (which is surely a good antidote for the simplified reading) to perceive Kafka as a tireless “fighter” who “focussed on the fight itself regardless of the fact whether its goal was possible to reach or not” (R. Karst, *Posłowie*, in: F. Kafka, *Zamek*, translated by K. Radziwiłł, K. Truchanowski, Warsaw 1958).

⁴⁵ The distinction was introduced in relation to Eastern Bloc states in Western political sciences. Bates quoted the concept after Ray Toras (*Ideology in Socialist State. Poland 1956–1983*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 27–29, 36–38). Vide J. Bates, *Cenzura w epoce stalinowskiej*, “Teksty Drukie” 2000, issue 1–2, p. 96.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

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Kajetan Mojsak

**The Polish Trial of Kafka. On the Reception of Franz Kafka and So-Called
“Dark Literature” by the Censorship Board**

(Summary)

The article discusses the reception of Franz Kafka’s novels and the so-called “dark literature”, popular after 1956, by the censorship board. It presents the discussions around Kafka’s work and various interpretational strategies used to secure this literature a place in the culture of People’s Republic of Poland. The article presents analyses of the censors’ reviews of Kafka’s (but also Sartre’s or Faulkner’s) novels and offers insight into the censorship process and the literary life of the late 1950s in general.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, censorship