

Directions in Empirical Literary Studies

In honor of Willie van Peer

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The apology of popular fiction

Everyday uses of literature in Poland

Maciej Maryl

Popular fiction is expelled from literary canons and is usually treated as a form of ludic or emotional relaxation and an escape from daily problems (Nell 1988; Radway 1984). Drawing on the results of my study on Polish readers, I claim that reading popular fiction, as an everyday-life activity, is much more than a simple leisurely activity, and plays a vital role in the way readers cope with their surrounding environment. Employing the framework of phenomenological sociology I argue that reading popular fiction can be described in terms of a rational action undertaken in order to achieve specific pragmatic goals, such as emotional tuning or search for subjectively important information.

Keywords: phenomenological sociology, life world, reading, popular fiction, canon, Poland

1. Introduction

Why are some books perceived to be better than others? It is customary for works considered memorable for a certain culture to be listed in various canons. A knowledge of the canon marks one's cultural competence. Sometimes, however, the other functions of reading, or its distinctive role in readers' everyday lives are largely overlooked, and literature is perceived only through its social role, as the recent changes in the canon of required reading in Poland attests.

The revision of the canon was proposed by Roman Giertych, deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education in Jarosław Kaczyński's conservative Cabinet from May 2006 to August 2007. The canon he planned to revise is very important in Poland, as it contains readings that are required at *matura* – a high school ending examination. On May 2007 Minister Giertych proposed to cross out Witold

Gombrowicz, a great writer and critic of Polish nationalism and for non-Polish authors he left no room for Kafka or Dostoyevsky. Instead, Giertych added to the list two books by Jan Dobraczyński, a Catholic writer. The other author he added was John Paul II and two of his works: a book of essays (full text) and his biography (Giertych 2007). The canon was reshaped in order to convey the 'right' ideology, namely conservatism, Catholicism, and a specific version of blind patriotism, rooted in the hard times of the 18th and 19th century and criticized ever since.

The debate provoked by Giertych's decision, which swept through the Polish public sphere in the following months, did not undermine the basic concept of the literary canon, understood as a codification of books, which present ideas significant and fundamental to a certain community. The controversy was then not solely about the books, but about their ideological perspective. The discussion and its outcome (rejection of Giertych's proposal by the Prime Minister) was one of the factors leading to the collapse of the ruling coalition and early elections. Although this is an extreme example of imposing ideology on the canon of required reading, it tells us something about the ways we perceive the canon in our cultures.

The concept of the canon as a pillar of society draws heavily on the romantic understanding of literature. In 1765, Samuel Johnson pictured literature as an expression of general nature. Yet, in 1773 Johan Gotfried von Herder introduced the notion of literature as the extract of national spirit, which influenced the philosophy of romanticism. Due to political changes in the 19th century and the emergence of the concept of nation (Anderson 1983), literature started to be conceived in a rather different perspective, as a nation-building factor, and was taught that way at universities (Hillis-Miller 2002: 2–8). It is through literature that the members of a community learn where they belong, and construct their social, cultural and national identities. Drawing from Fish's (2004) concept of interpretive community, we may say that the canon is what the members have agreed upon to be valuable for the community itself. Community members, we can say from this perspective, choose certain books and agree upon the way they should be interpreted. Paulson (1997) provides a definition which captures this notion accurately. According to him, the canon is "the nebulous collection of works that at a given time are seen as enduring and worthy of study, and with which serious aspirants to membership in literary communities must be acquainted" (1997: 227).

In the preface to *The Western Canon* (1994), Harold Bloom characterizes the discussion of the canon, as a

debate between the right-wing defenders of the Canon, who wish to preserve it for its supposed (and nonexistent) moral values, and the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment, who wish to overthrow the

Canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change (1994: 4)

This notion captures accurately the approach to the reading lists discussed before. Bloom, however, distinguishes another type of the canon, which he defines as “the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written” (ibid.: 17). Bloom seems to believe in the canon as a rather universal set, independent of social or political currents, since its principles of selectivity are “founded upon severely artistic criteria” (ibid.: 23). Hence, he distances himself from debates over the literary canon, claiming there are some works in which aesthetic quality is indisputable and universal.

The difference between those approaches does not only concern the criteria of selection (memorable ideology vs. literary values), but also the role literature plays in readers’ lives. Bloom questions social uses of literature when he claims that “reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen” (ibid.: 30). Instead he adds: “All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one’s own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality” (ibid.). In other words, what is the most valuable here is the unique encounter between the reader and the text, not the memorable meaning the text conveys.

Yet, the question remains, how should we treat popular literature that is excluded from literary canons of both types, since it seems not to convey any values fundamental for a community, nor it is of exceptional literary quality. Critics often overlook the positive aspects of popular literature, treating it only as a part of a mighty machinery of mass culture. They conceive of it as “stories of adventure and excitement which satisfy desires for variety frustrated by urban living” (Kernan 1973: 40).

A similar, but not so critical approach, may be found in studies into popular readership (Nell 1988; Radway 1984). Those researchers view the act of reading popular fiction as a form of ludic or emotional relaxation and an escape from daily problems. Although I do agree with such a perspective, I claim that reading popular fiction, as an everyday-life activity, means much more than a simple leisurely activity, and plays a vital role in the way readers cope with their surrounding environment.

In this paper I show how readers use popular literature as a tool for achieving various goals. The experience of popular fiction, I will claim, could be as much rewarding for an individual as the exploration of the canon. Although such approach was presented before (eg., in Radway 1984) I would like to discuss everyday uses of literature in Poland, in the light of institutional approach towards reading, mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper. I reckon that the framework of phenomenological sociology applied in this paper may provide interesting insights on this field.

2. The canon and everyday uses of literature

Popular fiction is non-canonical, what evokes a specific feeling of guilt in readers. In the course of my study (Maryl 2007), I undertook a participant observation in a public library. When my researcher's identity was revealed to a lady in her fifties, who was putting a number of romances on the counter, she cried: "These are not my usual readings, I've read the classical books, but I need something lighter right now".¹ This sense of guilt stems from the awareness of disobedience to cultural norms of reading.

The study (*ibid.*) was mostly based on interviews with employees of public libraries. Librarians would rather see their clients reading canonical works, but admit that common readers tend to prefer popular fiction to canonical readings. From the readers' perspective the canon is something culturally approved and desired, but at the same time considered difficult and boring, and as such, dismissed. Moreover, common readers feel the cultural pressure on their choices and they 'know' that they 'should' read the classical and acclaimed fiction, but they do not. As one of the librarians put it – they suffer from the "unbearable lightness of their readings". Nell traces the roots of this feeling of guilt to Protestant ethics, which entails "that pleasure must be earned, and that the effortlessness of ludic reading makes its pleasures as hollow as the euphoria of the junkie or the orgasm of the masturbator" (1988: 32).

Nell claims that this dissonant, caused by reading literature acknowledged as simplistic, can be resolved in two ways: "One is to acknowledge that I do in fact read trash, but that I have a moral license to do so; the other is to argue that while many people read trash [...] my own reading matter is clearly not trash" (*ibid.*: 44). As Radway observes in her study on female romance readers "Guilt arises as a result of the readers' own uneasiness about indulging in such an obviously pleasurable experience" (1984: 106).

Both Radway and Nell agree that readers resolve this dissonant by claiming the information value of the books they read (Radway 1984: 112–114; Nell 1988: 44). Women in Radway's study believed "very strongly that romance reading is worthwhile because the stories provide pleasure while the activity of reading challenges them to learn new words and information about a world they find intriguing and all too distant" (*ibid.*: 116).

Yet, I believe that this informational function of popular readings shall be considered as something more than a simple justification of readers' choices. I claim that readers use books in order to fulfil their own goals, which are not entirely of a

1. All quotes from the study in Maryl 2007 I translated from Polish.

ludic or emotional nature. In order to support this claim I will draw on the results of my study in which I investigated the role of literature in readers' everyday lives (Maryl 2007).

Employing the framework of phenomenological sociology, I wanted to investigate how readers take the advantage of literature in coping with daily life. This approach is different from the one discussed by Paulson (1997), who concentrated on practical aspects of literacy and literature's contribution to improvement of one's professional skills (e.g., decision-making). In my study I am concentrating on less abstract goals determined by one's everyday-life. Later in this chapter I will claim that some everyday reading practices are not a simple leisure, being more complex and having specific pragmatic goals.

I employed the theoretical framework of phenomenological sociology, focusing on the life world and the actor's practical interest. Life world, a concept based on Edmund Husserl's notion of *Lebenswelt* (Husserl 1970), is a phenomenological construct through which we experience reality. Life world, in general, is the world as we see it and experience it, a sort of a mental filter, through which we select information, being guided by our practical interest (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). As Schutz (1964) claims, our life worlds are divided into several spheres of importance, which are put into hierarchical order according to our practical interest (from the most important sphere, to the least important one). Robert Gorman provides a good summary of Schutz's argument:

we are all unique actors, each a product of a biographically determined situation, belonging to only one person. Meaning and knowledge, those factors determining how we define our situations and act, are constituted subjectively through our perceiving and experiencing the world (1975: 6).

Every action undertaken by actors has its 'in-order-to' motive: a "future desired state of affairs as anticipated when action is begun" (ibid.: 4). All such motives are subject to the actors' life world: "each actor experiences and defines his situation and chooses his projects in the context of his own unique, subjective existence" (ibid.: 3). In other words, Schutz claims that every action has its purpose, which is dictated by one's own biography. I will claim that reading popular fiction is such an activity, through which readers achieve individually determined goals and enrich their life worlds. The structure of the life world, a biographically determined situation, conditions a reader's response. The goals achieved through reading, the experience gained in the fictional world, constitute a part of the life world. This active search for information and emotions is deeply rooted in one's everyday experience.

The patterns of readers' behavior, presented below, outline the importance of their everyday motives. That is the main difference between socio-phenomenological

inquiry and the psychological approach taken by Nell, who measured the 'interest in a book' by "asking readers to decide which book they would most like to relax with" (1988: 122). In the study below I am not primarily interested in the psychological nature of reading processes, but rather in reading as an intentional act having its roots and consequences in everyday life.

3. Methodology

Investigating readers' everyday reading behavior requires access to actual readers in the most 'natural' circumstances, where possible bias (e.g., economical factors) is minimal. Hence I decided to investigate the clients of public libraries who access the books freely, over a convenient time span, with minimal effort (e.g., they do not have to pay for the books they choose).

The main methodological problem here concerned readers' self-idealizations of their literary attitudes. Large sociological surveys on reading seem to back up this claim (e.g., biannual surveys conducted by the Polish National Library; see Straus et al. 2004). People asked directly about their reading habits tend to over-emphasize the amount of "acclaimed" readings among their choices.

In order to avoid the self-idealization bias I drew on Alfred Schutz's concept of a well-informed citizen (Schutz 1964). He argues that a well-informed citizen mediates between a man on the street (not interested in understanding more than he needs to), and the expert (who specializes in a narrow sphere of knowledge). Well-informed citizens have both practical and theoretical knowledge of a certain topic. That is why I chose librarians to be well-informed citizens in my study, to serve as informants guiding me through the everyday world of their clients – readers.

The world of readers' everyday life is complex and its exploration, I believe, requires a qualitative approach. That is why I drew on interpretative sociology, aiming at 'understanding' the motives behind readers everyday behavior, rather than 'explaining' them in a quantitative manner. Hence, the results do not aspire to be representative or statistically valid. That is the task of quantitative researchers. Yet, in this chapter I am proposing an interpretation of interviews from the perspective of phenomenological sociology, what, I reckon, sheds some light on everyday reading practices of Polish readers.

In the course of the study I applied such qualitative techniques as interviews and observation. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with employees of 11 different libraries, and one participant observation in a public library. In order to differentiate the sample I decided to visit libraries in villages, small and medium towns in the Warsaw area. In large cities (Warsaw and Cracow) I chose 3 libraries from different districts to ensure the sample's diversification.

The interviews were carried on in April 2007. In selected libraries I interviewed those librarians (one per library), who had direct contact with readers. In order to learn as much as I can from librarians themselves, and to avoid framing their responses in previously set categories, I asked them open questions, concerning motivation for reading (why people read), aspects of the book choice (what readers mention, when asking for a book recommendation; do they mention different), the role of literature among other activities of the everyday life (how often their clients read and in which circumstances).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Both transcripts and notes from the observation were interpreted in the framework of phenomenological sociology, according to discovered patterns. I am not going to discuss the study as whole. What follows is a presentation of some aspects of the study, covering the role of popular fiction in readers' everyday lives.

4. Results: Everyday uses of literature

I have already mentioned that the leisure reading is usually described as an escape from everyday problems and a mental relaxation; I reckon that Eva Maria Scherf (1990), a German cognitivist, provides better categories to capture this phenomenon. Scherf distinguishes three kinds of reception: reception as an action, activity and operation. The first two types describe the everyday reading, whereas the last one, which I leave out here, refers to a scientific activity, such as literary criticism, or academic interpretation. Reading as an action, in Scherf's terms, serves as an emotional stimuli or a tool to "to break down particular internal tensions (for example, by laughing)" (ibid.: 491). The other type, reading as an activity, is based on the reader's individual biography, and its superior motive is a "desire to (re)cognize oneself and the world in appropriating a text [...] the reader/viewer/listener seeks to take from the text whatever s/he can relate as directly as possible to personal practice (ibid.)". Both those aspects are equally visible and important in the reading of popular fiction.

In her study of romance readers, Radway concentrates on the emotional side of the reading process, whose main goals are relaxation and escape (1984: 88). It seems that in her study both types of reading proposed by Scherf are subject to the psychological benefits of the reader. I will compare my findings with her framework, discussing the everyday uses of literature firstly as a tool for emotional tuning, secondly, as a means of obtaining information about the world.

Radway's framework of leisure reading allows us to distinguish three aspects of the emotional impact of reading in everyday life: (1) escape from daily problems (ibid.: 93); (2) relieving tensions (ibid.: 95); (3) compensation through

vicarious emotional nurturance and imaginative conversation with adults from a broad spectrum of social space (*ibid.*: 113). I conceive of these phenomena as different forms of what readers acquire through the mechanism we could call 'losing touch with reality', 'being lost in a book' (Nell 1984), or transportation (Gerrig 1993; Green & Brock 2000; Green 2004).

However, I claim this mechanism is not autotelic, as a simple leisure is. Contrarily, it always has its purpose. The traveler who sets off on the journey into the fictional realm of a book, always has some basic interests (not necessarily conscious) she wants to fulfil during this trip. I am going to discuss the practical, everyday side of this psychological phenomenon in more detail, drawing on the results of my study (Maryl 2007). What follows is not an attempt to construct any typology, but rather a list of several everyday motives that guide the popular fiction reading process. The proposed perspective shows how psychological aspects of reading are employed in readers' daily life. The motives I am going to discuss are: (a) seeking specific emotions (positive/negative), (b) emotional stimulation, (c) relaxation, (d) escape through vicarious activities.

a. Processing of a literary text relies heavily on the readers' mood and their need to alter or deepen it. This motive is described by Radway as a general aim of romance readers (1985: 90). Readers often ask librarians: "Help me find something cheerful, funny, so I could break away for a while". Popular fiction readers often look for positive emotions, for example, this love-stories enthusiast, who said: "I had to release the tension. You know, regardless if it's silly or not, I just had to". Reading helps in modifying the mood evoked by everyday events. Perceiving positive events in protagonists' lives leads to the consoling observation: 'at least somebody (namely, the protagonist) has succeeded'.

b. Reading also serves as an emotional stimulus, a sort of a natural stimulation tool. This function is very often sought by persons who work nights, such as nurses on emergency shifts, for instance. Those workers read to avoid sleeping. One librarian observed that night watchmen often come to her library, "cause they have this sort of job, that you just sit and turn stupid. And then they suddenly realize they want a book".

c. But rather it is the contrary function of reading that is the most common—literature serves as a tool of soothing emotions and facilitating falling asleep. As one of the librarians in my study put it: "I can't sleep. To avoid lying on bed and thinking, I read". Literature serves here as a kind of a natural sleeping pill.

It is worth of mentioning that the function a text has to play determines the book choice. The text has to be simple and by no means absorbing. As one librarian admits: "nothing lulls me to sleep so well as this monotony, this stupid monotony". Otherwise, literature serves as a stimulation.

d. A different form of losing touch with reality is experiencing vicariously through reading. It occurs when a reader is deprived of the possibility of action. Entering the world of fiction provides her with similar emotions as in the case of real action. As Radway puts it, "they escape figuratively into a fairy tale" (1985: 93). We can distinguish here a temporary and a durable deprivation. A book serves as a temporary, vicarious activity when a reader travels in public transportation, for instance. She has to remain in a static position, hence concentration on events from the fictional world helps her keep the cognitive resources busy. The actual life world is torn out from the actor's body, and it's being removed to a different reality. If the deprivation is durable, reading substitutes an actual activity, which certain readers can no longer perform to the extent they need it. It is a vital function of reading, especially in the case of people having much spare time, such as retired persons. Literature helps to kill time, or rather to sustain the contact with the social reality people are deprived of. Reading serves as a substitute of a common social activity, providing readers with insights into biographies and motivations of other people.

As I tried to show, the psychological aspects of literary response can be described in terms of a rational action undertaken in order to achieve specific goals. In other words, readers take the advantage of the properties of the reading process and make good use of them to achieve non-literary goals.

The same, I would claim, goes for the other type of response, Sherf calls reading as an action. I have already mentioned the approach proposed by Radway (1984) and Nell (1988), who treat readers' claims about the informational value of popular fiction as an excuse not to read more acclaimed books. I will claim, however, that readers, guided by their biographically determined practical interest, do seek and do find subjectively important information in popular fiction. In order to show that dimension of leisure reading, I would like to focus on those parts of my study that dealt with the relation between readers' biographies and their choice of books.

Librarians, who usually know their clients from informal conversations during their visits in libraries, observe that readers, in general, search for topics relevant to their own experience, biographies and everyday problems. Some readers, for instance, ask for books on family relationships. "It is a sort of a book", a librarian explains, "which conveys the family values and reassures the reader". The book serves here as a tool for attaining intersubjectivity: the reader observes a different (but similar) world and draws some conclusions from this observation. This practical interest is either directed towards the unknown content one wants to discover, or concerns the already known situations or problems that will be either illuminated from a different perspective or solved.

In the first case the practical motive is to deepen one's knowledge about the world by gaining information relevant to one's own biography and hierarchy of importance. The knowledge attained in this way becomes a part of one's experience. A good example of this function of literary reading is the reader's search for guidance in the previously unknown/unfamiliar situation. For instance, a reader asked one librarian about the novels on the Middle-East, because her daughter has an Arab boyfriend and the mother was worried.

In the case of the inward-directed reading, the aim is to elaborate difficult situations or problems of the daily life that bother the reader in a particular moment. "If a reader suffers from an illness," a librarian explains, "he searches for a book about it. And it doesn't have to be a grave illness". In a similar way teenage readers ask for books dedicated to such problems as addictions, first love or eating disorders. Such reading deepens their understanding of their own actions and attitudes. It also gives them access to both different patterns of behaviour and the reasons behind them.

Although Nell claimed that practical interest in reading is rather attached to non-fiction (1984: 122), my interviews with librarians show the opposite. Readers tend to prefer to read fictional accounts rather than scientific books on aspects vital for them, be it middle-eastern culture or bulimia. This preference tells us a lot about the role of literature in acquiring new knowledge. Literature provides us with a thick, elaborated description of both depicted events and protagonists' behavior. Hence, readers prefer to explore the world through literature, because literary reading is by no means a passive act of acquiring new information. Contrarily, it is a sort of an active dialogue of the reader's own experience with the new content, a dialogue directed by a practical interest and facilitated by literature.

5. Conclusion

As I tried to show, popular fiction reading should not be analysed exclusively as a leisurely activity. I claim that readers use this kind of literature in order to achieve some pragmatic goals of everyday life. I argued that reading in the popular fiction is guided by the biographically determined reader's practical interest. That is to say that readers use literature as a tool for alternating and expanding their life worlds.

This approach may be useful in education. Knowing the possible functions of literature should help us to pay more attention to students' awareness of what they can find in literary texts and how they can use them on their own in order to cope with everyday life. Treating literature solely as a sociological document conveying ideology, as happened lately in Poland, is not enough, and it raises students' negative attitudes towards literary texts.

I do not claim that we should get rid of canonical readings, or abandon detailed analyses of certain works. But I do claim that in the classroom we should also pay attention to those areas of literature that are usually omitted and underestimated by literary scholars, such as popular fiction. The emphasis should not be put on the history of literature, but on the reading process, namely on how readers can benefit from works of different periods, including the canonical ones, in order to enrich their life worlds and deal better with the surrounding environment.

Hence I strongly call for rehabilitation of popular fiction. It should not be overlooked by architects of reading lists. Perhaps this kind of reading does not convey the meaning memorable for the society, nor it embodies distinctive literary values. It is however still important for individual readers, since such reading plays a vital role in their experience of everyday life. Let me paraphrase Bloom, quoted earlier in this paper, all that popular fiction can bring one is one's confrontation with one's everyday life.

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