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Stanisław Przybyszewski: In and Out of Pop Culture

Abstract

Stanisław Przybyszewski's oeuvre is not "pop". This paper scrutinizes a catalogue of determinants that encouraged the writer's initial renown and then led to his ultimate decline in popularity. Was Przybyszewski's "fall from grace" justifiable? In my analysis, I refer to three different approaches to the concept of "pop". In the first approach, "pop" is understood as a contrast between high and low culture. In the second, it is interpreted in relation to the institutions that indirectly affirm and popularize one's literary input. The third one is associated with source literary text editing. Using these three categories is not supposed to present the author himself, but rather a certain phenomenon in European literary culture. Przybyszewski, the so-called "meteor of the Young Poland period", is a particularly poignant example of how initial fascination with an avant-garde artist could change into oblivion and absence in reading culture. The comments formulated in this article are directed primarily to the reader who does not know the history of Polish literature, and the method of reaching the reader is to focus on a selected example showing a repeatable sequence in careers of many other authors of the period.

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Introduction

Much has been written about Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927) — his name has appeared for decades both in strictly scientific discourse and in studies that aim to popularize his writings. Most of these texts begin with a similar juxtaposition of opposites that describe this Young Poland author: on the one hand, a great writer, on the other, a hack; a leading modernist of the Polish literature — the author of forgotten (or unknown) works; a visionary — a scandalmonger.

Looking at Stanisław Przybyszewski's oeuvre, one can attempt to create a catalogue of determinants of its initial popularity and the later absence thereof. This catalogue can be based on three different interpretations of the concept of "pop", with the reservation that the idea does not belong in the vocabulary of Przybyszewski or his times and will be only used for retrospective analysis. Using this catalogue, one could thematise the contemporary presence or absence of other creators of Polish culture at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, who are neither not remembered nor recalled¹.

The category of "pop" itself is not, and cannot be, homogenous, and similarly, it is difficult to define the concept of popular culture. The wealth and diversity of cultural studies on the subject demonstrate the difficulty of providing a standard definition of the concept (Fornas 1995; Szeman & O'Brien 2017: 1–18; Storey 2018: 1–17; Danesi 2019: 14–62), therefore, I suggest that we use three different types of approaches to the subject. In the first, described as classical, popular culture and elite culture are considered to be opposites. The second is related to the role of institutions that promote culture and act as agents between creators and their audiences. The third is connected to work on source literary texts and the popularization of such texts by editors. Referring to these three types does not mean that, by employing them, it will be possible to develop a global approach to the discussed problems. Instead, the point is to use these three approaches to deal with the main question of this article: what are the circumstances that make it possible for an artist to become established in culture or pop culture, or to stop being part of them? This paper is an attempt to answer this question based on Stanisław Przybyszewski's oeuvre.

¹ Some of the examples are: Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam), Wacław Berent, Maria Komornicka (Piotr Odmieniec Włast), Karol Irzykowski, Michał Choromański, Jan Lemański.

Approach 1. “Pop” as the opposition between popular and high culture

Marek Krajewski points out that there is a special way of defining popular culture that deserves the appellation of “classical”. It appears in texts by such authors as Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Ernest van den Haag, David Riesman, Allan Bloom, Czesław Miłosz, Marcin Czerwiński, or Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Krajewski 2005: 17). This circle of authors could be described as, after Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006), a group of cultural pessimists, in which Dienstag also includes, of course, Theodor W. Adorno or Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Dienstag, one of the common characteristics of these authors is their sceptical attitude toward the dominant concept of cultural progress. At this point, it should be added that idealizing the system of values and tastes characteristic of popular culture is just one aspect of this particular interpretation of cultural progress, while different authors, in their criticism of this “progress,” put their accents differently and formed partly contrasting positions.

What may be peculiar to the classical approach is the belief that the relationship between popular culture and elite culture is based on their mutual opposition. In this approach, popular culture equals “culture of the people, addressed to the people, and practiced by the people” (Krajewski 2005: 17). It is also seen as low culture, failing to meet the requirements of being elite. However, this opposition is derived from the elitist perspective. The division is usually made by those who cling to the notion of the absolute superiority of elite culture. From this point of view, the accessibility of pop culture products is conditional on its fundamental banality. What is clear and easy to understand in pop culture is nothing more than the result of pandering to unrefined tastes that demand easy satisfaction. The resulting opposition has nothing in common with any neutral description of collective tastes and values. From the very beginning, it has been designed as a measure of social criticism, a form of attack against the entire formation of modern society based on culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer 1997), whose capitalist and democratizing transformations have caused the legitimacy of high culture to be challenged increasingly openly and forcefully. The distinguishing feature of this formation was the triumph “of a hyperdemocracy in which the mass acts directly, outside the law, imposing its aspirations and its desires by means of material pressure. [...] The mass crashes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select” (Gasset 1932: 17–18).

The unequivocally critical connotation that the concept of “pop” is given in this classical interpretation of popular culture was well known and familiar to Przybyszewski as well. As an artist, he renounced, on principle, any attempts at making art, especially his own, “pop” in this sense. According to his own belief, he was the absolute opposite of those who Jim McGuigan described, many years later, as *cultural populists*, “for whom the symbolic practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than culture with a capital C” (McGuigan 1992: 2). Przybyszewski created an artistic concept that derives art from social life. When creating the framework of this new concept, he assumed, to an extent, the absence of a specific audience, and his peculiar attitude toward the popularization of his own work has had the opposite effect.

“**Manifesto of sin**”. In his most intensive creative period, Przybyszewski published two articles: *Confiteor* (1899) and *O nową sztukę [For ‘New’ Art]* (1899). These manifestos sparked heated discussions and disputes as they attempted to define the boundaries of art and new directions for artistic endeavours, as well as the activities of the artist. Preaching the

philosophy of “art for art’s sake” and “naked soul”, Przybyszewski opposed the mimetic and social purpose of art, and called for creating art exclusively for the sophisticated audience. The author opposed the existence of art as a commonplace activity, a type of entertainment for the people, because, as he arrogantly advised, the people “need bread [...], and when they get bread, they will find their path themselves” (Przybyszewski 2000: 221). His ambition was to put, he wrote, true art on a pedestal. He wanted to restore the value and autonomy that it rightfully deserved. As far as authors themselves were concerned, he exempted them from any obligation toward the nation because he felt that they did not serve, and did not have to serve, any idea or society. In turn, those who despite all succumb to the demands of society he compared to the “humble, hard-working ox” (Przybyszewski 2000: 222). By establishing this kind of framework, the writer automatically deprived himself of any audience, setting an impassable limit to the possible popularization of his work among, paraphrasing the title of one of his posthumous works, “his contemporaries” (cf. Przybyszewski 1930).

The new manifesto was based on individualism and anti-intellectualism, and recognized the value of intuition. The primary objective of art was to “reach the deepest sources of experience, explain and learn about life not in its arbitrary and changeable forms, but in those where its essence, its metaphysical truth is expressed” (Hutnikiewicz 1976: 49). Regardless of the artistic value of art based on these aspirations, its epistemological element was not intended to draw attention to cultural values, as neither the bourgeois who went to the theatre, nor popular culture, symbolically separated from the theatre, were of interest to Przybyszewski. Instead, it was supposed to focus attention on something else: such a hierarchy of artistic values where all that is low, easy and attractive to the people contradicts the creator’s calling as an artist.

This “new” art, according to Przybyszewski, required a new foundation — the soul — “naked soul” (Pol. *naga dusza*) — which he understood as “transcendental consciousness of every state that [...] it has experienced, consciousness of [...] all life, supreme powers, and mysteries of nature” (Przybyszewski 2006: 151). In a way, Przybyszewski commanded artists to bare their souls, that is to liberate themselves from what is external, bound by culture, stifled by consciousness. Paradoxically, he forced them into freedom: a pure, honest expression of internal life, an expression of the primordial being. Przybyszewski anticipated this primordial nature of being before psychoanalysis and depth psychology; in some places, the concept of the naked soul mirrors the Freudian id, the subconscious, or the Bergsonian deep self, which was pointed out by many contemporary researchers (Hutnikiewicz 1976: 49; Boniecki 1993: 47–55; Matuszek 2008: 84; Nycz 2013: 91–122). As an artistic aspect of the literary work, the naked soul cannot be comprehended by just anyone; it requires special preparation, sensibility, and imagination characteristic of an artist. Thus, the universal nature of the problem of the naked soul makes it impossible for it to become popular.

The changes proposed by Przybyszewski also applied to the dramatic arts. After August Strindberg, the author believed that the source of tragic conflict is the fatal power of sex, which is to blame for people being torn between succumbing to it and fighting the primitive instinct. Przybyszewski was also familiar with plays by Henrik Ibsen and Maurice Maeterlinck (cf. Ratuszna 2005: 96–99). Following in Ibsen’s footsteps, the author of *Śnieg [Snow]* declared his departure from excessively complicated plots, as well as from monologues, which

made characters' speech seem stilted². Unlike the authors of "well-made plays", enjoying immense popularity at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, he did not waste the first act on exposition, putting the events with key impact on the presented story even before the curtain was raised. What the spectator saw was only the repercussions of past events, often serving as punishment for old mistakes. In a similar way to Ibsen, lowering the curtain was just a preface to the characters' greatest tragedy. However, the tragedy itself will not be witnessed by the spectators, who are left only with the idea of the tragedy rising with no end in sight.

The structure of symbolic figures that personify internal conflicts that occur in the souls of his characters was also borrowed by Przybyszewski from Ibsen; as regards the atmosphere of terror that these figures evoked, the Polish writer attempted to create it using tropes borrowed from Maeterlinck. However, the vague, subtle moodiness of the Belgian's work is a far cry from the explicit, exclamatory means of expression used by Przybyszewski³.

In the new drama, tragedy comes not from the outside but from the inside of the characters. While Przybyszewski saw the heroes of the Greek tragedy as "toys in the hands of the gods" (Przybyszewski 2006: 299), in the new drama the heroes are the toy of their own instincts and feelings; it is against these that they struggle, and to these they succumb, suffering defeat. They are the only source of tragic guilt — it is they who make the choices and are morally responsible for all of their actions.

Przybyszewski saw the theatre not as a venue for frivolous entertainment but a place where one must bring up the most challenging subjects rooted in the most powerful human experiences. The author conferred upon theatre the culture-forming role (in the normative sense), which had been forgotten in the bourgeois drama. Hence the higher expectations that he set for directors, actors, and the audience alike. A consequence of the emergence of the new kind of drama was a new model of the actor, radically different from the actor in the traditional drama, whose task was, according to Przybyszewski, trivial: "the stronger he shouted, the more he writhed upon the stage, the more he flailed his arms and legs, the more respect and fame he reaped" (Przybyszewski 2006: 298–99). The author emphasized the necessity of presenting the truth about the world and people; after all, genuine feelings are not expressed through excessive movements, shouting, or hiding behind costumes and makeup. A good actor is the one who forgets that they are on the stage, that they are being observed and judged, otherwise their movements and speeches might seem false. Only by rejecting the external determinants of the legitimacy of the theatrical performance can the actor become the desired character. Przybyszewski would deride the way that actors performed at the time, pointing to affected intonation and grotesque poses. He demanded the "absolute truth of life in an actor's performance" (Przybyszewski 2006: 303). However, he explained that this truth has little in common with excessive realism, because the latter can only lead to artificiality, requiring a continuous focus on the detail.

In Przybyszewski's plays, all accessories of the outside world are reduced to the minimum; he departs from naturalism also through the absence of a defined time, place, and plot, which suggests that he does not aim for realism. The reception of the work requires continuous attention and focus, which the observer should maintain until the very end of the spectacle.

² However, it is just a declaration — Przybyszewski's style is manneristic; in his plays, characters do not speak naturally but in a bombastic way, full of unjustified gravity.

³ The lack of originality in building the mood in Przybyszewski's plays was mentioned by Roman Taborski, who cited Irena Sławińska's comments in: *Przybyszewski o dramacie*, "Dialog" 1962, nr 10, 106–107.

The spectator is also expected to participate in the tragedy, which they should treat as a shorthand to be filled with their own impressions and recreate the event that they cannot see on stage from inside themselves. The new type of spectator proposed by Przybyszewski is characterized by intelligence. The “perfect” spectator is the one who does not need any explanation.

The kind of art that Przybyszewski posited in his manifestos could only find an audience among those who, based on the “elite-mass” division, belonged in the first part of the dichotomy: in the community of artists, sensitive and extraordinary people. The kind of art for which he strived was full of metaphysical reflections to which the audience at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was still unaccustomed, but first of all, it was to be free from serving any purpose beyond art itself and was to be uninvolved nationally, politically, or socially.

Imagining an (impossible) audience. The audience at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was not ready for avantgarde subjects (soul, metaphysics, psychology) even if dressed in an attractive ensemble of electrifying buzzwords, for which Przybyszewski was famous and which today represent a disreputable symbol of his work (eroticism, satanism, provocation). It floated on the surface of its own interests (or perhaps just curiosity) but failed to keep up with the artist’s thought. Przybyszewski wanted his characters to be set apart from any reality; the type of hero that he proposed was basically a materialized psychological quality, not fully embedded in any cultural context. It is even difficult to find any morally good or evil characters in his work; what is more, none of them has any dominant feature whatsoever. Przybyszewski refused to tempt the audience with an imitation of life, whereas the audience was more inclined to understand only what it recognized from everyday life.

The problem lies not only in that the audience was unprepared for a work constructed in such a way, but rather in the author’s own decisions concerning the popularization of his work, as he continually stressed that it was not for everybody. He vocally demanded that art be reserved only for the select. By doing so, he took a major gamble, which he emphatically lost, sentencing himself to rejection and alienation. At the same time, the belief that only this kind of imaginary elite spectator can understand the greatness of his work persists even today. Przybyszewski excited and moved the audience, but more often left it with an impression of sensationalism. One critic summed up this peculiar relationship in the following way:

Przybyszewski did not think about Canossa⁴; each of his performances was either a “fist to the nose” or a “kick of the leg” or “spitting” on the heads of the audience or the critics. (Cyps 1923)

Paradoxically, Przybyszewski demanded an audience with specific characteristics, such as sensibility, self-reliance, or vigilance, while being aware that this kind of audience did not exist, and ultimately, he did not care for a reception other than emotional. He appeared in Poland as a representative of an elite that, ostensibly, defined what was valuable. Before he came to Krakow, in 1898, with his wife Dagny Przybyszewska (beautiful and courted by others, including Munch and Strindberg; the age’s femme fatale), he had been an author of renown abroad; he had co-created bohemian literary circles in Berlin, had been a member of the international artistic community residing at the famous wine house *Zum schwarzen Ferkel* (*The Black Piglet*), and his name was linked to some of the great artists of the 1890s, such as August Strindberg, Henryk Ibsen, Gustaw Vigeland, Ola Hansson, Paul Scheebart, Carl Ludwig Schleich, Otto Erich Hartleben, Franz Ewers, Julius Bierbaum, Franz Sarvaes, Julius Hart,

⁴ Cf. Polish saying: *go to Canossa* — to be forced to humble oneself before the opponent.

Edvard Munch, or Richard Dehmel. His early essays in German (including the brochures *Zur Psychologie des Individuums*, I. *Chopin und Nietzsche*, II. *Ola Hansson*) were met with exceptional enthusiasm by the community, became the foundation on which “der geniale Pole”, as Strindberg called him, based his literary and artistic concepts. Meanwhile, the audience awaiting him in his homeland, after the initial bout of admiration that contributed to his immense popularity — which, however, resulted mainly from the author’s own intriguing person — rejected his concepts, products of his reflections and sensibility, at a very early stage, demanding what they already knew, what was familiar, what was safe.

The audience of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — a witness to the modernization and the acceleration of the world — rejected Przybyszewski as a thoroughly modernist writer. His work was not artistically outstanding. But what was outstanding was his sensitivity to the inevitable epochal change in modern subject⁵.

Depriving his own work of importance. Over his entire writing career, Przybyszewski assured his friends, critics, reviewers, and publishers — all of those on whom his existence depended, that each of his works was exceptional. His letters sent to loved ones and decision-makers include numerous personal notes that can be interpreted as self-reviews of his literary works, both those in progress and those that had been just completed, written to demonstrate that they exceeded his previous works in value and importance. These self-reviews resemble contemporary sleeve notes, which are used to advertise, and in this sense, they become interpretive texts (Rychlewski 2013: 102). The author provided some background details of a work, expounded its contents, suggested interpretations, and dictated the reception. By endowing his self-reviews with a powerful persuasive function, he challenged the self-sufficiency of the literary work, as if he suspected that it could not defend itself on its own, as if the stamp of uniqueness was required in case it went unnoticed in the work itself. The more emphatically Przybyszewski declared that his works were unique, the less strongly the artistic and literary concepts that he was promoting resonated. Without a specific direction for its reception, the text failed to become popular, and in time, as the literary value of Przybyszewski’s subsequent works diminished, his self-reviews became the object of ridicule among critics, and only served to confirm their own lack of purpose. They failed to inspire the mediating recipient (e.g. publisher or director) to purchase the work, as a result of which the work failed to become popular.

Also infamous is Przybyszewski’s excessively frivolous treatment of his own writings. The author of *Dzieci szatana* [*Satan’s Children*] hustled his own works — he would simultaneously swear to several people to whom he was offering the first printing of his novel or the right to a theatre premiere that they were the first, only and exclusive future owners of the work. Therefore, the ultimate holder of the work did not matter; what mattered was finding buyers, and finding them was not easy because Przybyszewski soon experienced a decline of interest in his work. Unreasonably, he attributed the absence of potential readers to their failure to understand his work, blaming others for his resultant pecuniary hardships. Moreover, this problematic understandability of the work was its intended and desirable feature. Przybyszewski was a part of the modernist trend in which an incomprehensible, non-transparent

⁵ Ryszard Nycz (2001), Włodzimierz Bolecki (2002) and Gabriela Matuszek (2003) are among some of those who showed the place and role of Przybyszewski as a writer who sensed the shocks of modernity.

text was a conscious artistic creation⁶. At the beginning of his writing, he vigilantly advised those who translated his texts or did editorial work to treat the incomprehensible expression of his writing as it appears. In a letter from 1893 he wrote to Ryszard Dehmel:

Edit whatever you want, but not the following: there are some images that are almost incomprehensible — and on purpose. In pursuit of an idea, five or ten metaphors are piled up on top of each other — and then some words repeat — you know, maniacal drive. There is a symbolism that is meant to force the brain to reproduce the same tone over and over again. (Przybyszewski 1937: 80)

The intended incomprehensibility of the work was supposed to be a condition for discovering what is new, what is in contrast to the known and the understood.

Approach 2. “Pop” within the field of consecrating institutions

After Marcin Rychlewski, I assume that the field of consecrating institutions is comprised of “critics, who grant literary awards; universities, which define the canon of prominent works; the Ministry of National Education, which creates the required reading list; and the schools, which then implement the list in the teaching process” (Rychlewski 2013: 25). Rychlewski emphasizes that the most important authority in the field is the authority of literary experts, who attempt to influence readers’ preferences and beliefs about reality. From this perspective, the problem of “pop” gains a new interpretation, closer to Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of art (1995), on which, by the way, Rychlewski based his conclusions (Rychlewski 2013: 22–36), than to the general criticism known from the classical approach employed by cultural pessimists. Therefore, the term “pop” can be used to describe what is considered important to culture by intellectual circles and literary communities which mediate in the process of popularizing a work. However, the group of Przybyszewski’s intellectual allies did not emerge either as a regular literary community or a sanctioned historical category.

Przybyszewski’s style and his circle. Between 1899 and 1903, Przybyszewski was on almost everyone’s lips in Berlin, Prague, Norway, and Poland. After coming to Kraków, he soon became editor-in-chief of “*Życie*” (“Life”), a magazine with grand literary and artistic ambitions that published works by all of the most renowned Polish writers, as well as German, French and Scandinavian modernists. It should be stressed that, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the magazine as such was a powerful opinion-making and culture-forming medium, although devoid of aesthetic elements. Under Przybyszewski’s direction, “*Życie*” became a unique periodical that stood out also in terms of art and graphics: it was printed on glossy paper in an unusually large format, it was full of painting reproductions, and the text was printed in an original type. As censors — who took an undue interest in readers’ moral values — often interfered, and some issues were confiscated, which resulted in financial problems, the magazine was eventually closed (1900).

In his homeland, Przybyszewski soon found readers and an audience — drawn by the rejuvenating spirit of the other — but lost them as soon as he had found them. Also, at an early stage, he attracted a group of imitators. Polish literature historians have even coined the term *Przybyszewski’s style* (Pol. *przybyszewszczyzna*) to describe the characteristics typical of the author’s work (mostly modernism and decadentism). In time, the term has taken on

⁶ On the theory of the necessary incomprehensibility of an artistic work and — paradoxically — the complementary theory of the inevitable comprehensibility of a literary work, see Karol Irzykowski (1913).

an extremely negative meaning, denoting all of the tendencies that drove young people into mimicry, graphomania, and imitation of their master, also when it came to his lifestyle. The fad disappeared as the Young Poland movement ended⁷.

The term *przybyszewszczyzna* also referred to the qualities of Przybyszewski's circles. This circle could be compared, in contemporary terms, to the fans of a pop music star, rather than a literary community as such, but there were no leading writers among them, as they were not interested in the company of random, inspired youngsters gazing into the eyes of the priest of art, who was able to enthrall people with just a word or the smallest gesture. None of them would probably have liked to be judged by their master. And if so, where did Przybyszewski's extensive retinue come from? To quote Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, an author with ties to the artistic community of Kraków, a friend of the Przybyszewskis, and a talented chronicler and essayist: "The only [...] criterion [...] was their — true or pretend — tragic approach to life. [...] he did not ask anyone what they had written or what their renown in art was. [...] he loved talentless people because he knew that their tragedy was honest, and tragedy meant everything to him. [...] If somebody were to tell him that he was a pederast, a consumptive, a drunk and a thief all in one — how they would endear themselves to him!" (Boy-Żeleński 1984: 85).

And although the phenomenon of *Przybyszewski's style* existed as a writer's mannerism, a kind of attitude, Przybyszewski did not build any strong artistic community that would adopt it, and then inspire generations, and as a result, excite crowds. The young believers in the art of the "Sad Satan", as the author was called, soon fled, having been momentarily inspired by his puissance, rather than the magnitude or effect of his talent. He had no followers who would interpret or adapt his literary concepts. Przybyszewski was left alone — he summed up his fate and prophesized his return in his characteristically provocative manner:

[...] I am only a meteor that will shine for an instant, and for an instant scare and terrify mankind, and then disappear suddenly [...]. The path designated for meteors is a billion times longer than the path of ordinary stars. [...] I would not want to be a star! To be a meteor, that is my essential longing: destroy several worlds in my journey, melt them inside me, enrich myself with them and come back after billions of years, blazing with a glare a hundred times hotter, to announce new changes and elaborations and disappear again [...] Let me fade away — I will fade away as soon as possible, only to return in greater power... And I will return — I will! (Przybyszewski 1938: 798)⁸

The circle of critics. Przybyszewski's early concepts and the way in which they were realized — mostly on stage — appalled the positivist community, but initially kindled the interest of the audience. Each of the author's works was widely commented. The critics most frequently targeted the anti-intellectual concept of art, with its autotelic interpretation, as well as the artist's amoral attitude. Piotr Chmielowski, one of the period's leading literary historians, summarized the principles of *Confiteor* in the following way:

⁷ Young Poland, i.e. the Polish variety of modernism in art, literature, and music in the period between 1898 and 1918.

⁸ It is interesting to compare his literary confession with Nietzsche's:

I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous — a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite. (Nietzsche 1989: 114)

Never have our highest ideals been so brutally kicked, nor our moral, social, and national principles so cynically disregarded as in [...] Przybyszewski's discourse. (Chmielowski 2000: 267)

The audience's enthusiastic reception of the author's first plays, mostly resulting from curiosity and the author's legend, was not always reflected in the reviewers' opinions. *Złote runo* [*The Golden Fleece*] was described as "the most immoral work that not only the Polish but also the debauched French contemporary literature has ever seen", and its characters were seen as "not people but licentious animals possessed by male instincts" (Zalewski 1901). The heated discussions about the play intrigued one of the most important Polish writers, Bolesław Prus, who contrary to his own principles, went to see the play, and afterwards said:

[...] the author outraged me. There was scarcely a scene that did not offend me. When I was listening and watching, I thought that somebody was pinching me, pricking me, stomping on my feet, pulling my hair, or, for a change, pouring a glass of water down my collar. (Prus 1901)

Another paradox: what Prus objected to in Przybyszewski's work was carried out intentionally, consciously, and, clearly, successfully. His goal was to "excite", to evoke emotion, to lay bare the violence of feelings that appear directly in the soul.

The erotic themes were, obviously, the subject of numerous comments. Especially ferocious was Teodor Jeske-Choiński, a writer of a clearly conservative persuasion, who argued that Przybyszewski's characters were mostly driven by sexual desire. This judgment, which disregarded the fundamental precepts of the concept of love that Przybyszewski espoused in his successive works, reinforced the negative opinions concerning his novels, while the writer himself became known as an author of the "sexual novel" (Jeske-Choiński 1914: 3). Przybyszewski's erotic subjects caused him the most infamy and made him the target of universal criticism. He became an "erotomaniac" first of all because he depicted love as ecstasy, a kind of expression, and showed its physiological side, which positivists usually omitted in literature, often presenting pathological cases, such as incest (*De profundis*) or necrophilia (*Requiem aeternam*).

Experts criticized both the author's excessive egotism and his tendency to analyse in detail his own mental states, which according to Przybyszewski's opponents, only served to glorify neuroses. Critics were offended by his tendency to focus on the individual, apart from the society. Moreover, this individual exhibited certain characteristics that positivism, which sought social order, considered to be typical of mental pathology. Przybyszewski's novels were populated by characters who scandalized the public: suicides, alcoholics, prostitutes, anarchists, and madmen. The critic's obligation was to prevent such immoral content from becoming common.

One positivist critic who made extremely negative comments about Przybyszewski's works included Antoni Sygietyński, an art and literary critic who, as early as in 1899, called Przybyszewski "the most diseased" of the other "diseased" people who may suffer from "an emphysema of personality" — those culture-destroying modernists who "continually take their own pulse, listen to their heartbeat, examine a twitch of the brain, squeeze the liver, check the colour of the tongue in the mirror, and have their bodies, every now and then and by turns, prodded by doctors, who they do not trust, or soothed by charlatans, who they deceive" (Sygietyński 2000: 430).

Andrzej Niemojewski, a writer whose work was informed by a bold social radicalism, called Przybyszewski a “prophet of derelicts”, connecting the author’s personal life with his work. He accused Przybyszewski of defiling the writer’s honour, but above all, corrupting the young acolytes who created his legend. In Niemojewski’s opinion, Przybyszewski depraved citizens: he turned potentially hardworking, decent, honest people into useless, impotent, and corrupt individuals (Niemojewski 2000: 268–271). How powerful was Przybyszewski’s influence in his opinion is demonstrated by his belief that an entire generation had been lost. If one considers Niemojewski to be the voice of the literary elite which is charged with safeguarding the order and which defines the boundary between the high and the low, between what is worth popularizing and what is not, Przybyszewski’s work becomes a symbol of culture that legitimately deserves to be called “popular” in the sense that it “captured” an entire generation of devoted readers.

Another critic was Henryk Sienkiewicz — one of the most eminent Polish writers, later honoured with the Nobel Prize for literature (1905). The author of “The Trilogy” found omnipresent “lust” and “lechery” — so often quoted today — in Przybyszewski’s plays, emphasizing that these qualities are harmful ethically, contrary to the truth, and worthless aesthetically (Przybyszewski 1937: 300).

The popularly negative image of Przybyszewski as a dubious scribbler who wrote odd literature was also significantly influenced by the satirical press, which published crude jokes and caricature drawings alluding to the writer’s life and his main subjects, such as the “naked soul” (Dynek 1994).

In line with the above-described model of reception, Przybyszewski has not been included in what Matthew Arnold described in his classic text as “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 2006: 5). The critics discredited the meaning and importance of Przybyszewski’s work and questioned its purpose from the very beginning, and this image was indelibly established in the age’s literary manifestos and discussions. It does not mean that there were no positive voices at all — one of these was Artur Górski’s manifesto entitled *Young Poland*, where the author compares two great figures of the age, concluding that “in world literature, Sienkiewicz is less important than [...] Przybyszewski” (Górski 2000: 100). Furthermore, there are numerous publications by Boy-Żeleński, which, also today, evoke the image of Przybyszewski as colourful, intriguing, nearly mythical (Boy-Żeleński 1956, 1984). However, these or similar texts influenced the potential audience to a lesser extent and failed to determine its tastes and the reception of the work in such a radical way.

Approach 3. “Pop” and the role of the editor

Rychlewski demonstrates how masterpieces, i.e. works that experts certify as canonical, are created, using the term “field of consecrating institutions”. At the same time, he supplements the term with another one: “field of the publishing market”, where bestsellers are “manufactured” (Rychlewski 2013: 26). Both fields are not entirely separate; they are intertwined and complement each other in various ways. It should be added that the field of the publishing market is the domain of the editor, an authority whose main goals include bringing texts that have been for various reasons forgotten or absent to readers. This brings us to the third approach: “pop” as the problem of the universal availability of a work, the issue of the presence of literary works in culture. This approach is important simply because the availability of the work itself precedes the classification of it as belonging either to elite culture or to pop cul-

ture. It is therefore a necessary condition for the work to be made into a bestseller or classified as a masterpiece at all. I propose the following thesis: Stanisław Przybyszewski's oeuvre is not universally available or popular, and editors are at least partly to blame for this state of affairs.

A life that anticipates work

It is banal, in the case of Stanisław Przybyszewski, to state that the attempts at popularizing his person have been fraught with difficulties. Personal scandal accompanied his artistic triumph; admiration for the work was followed by moral outrage; the legend about the author followed the author's own legend. Late in his life, Przybyszewski began writing memoirs (Przybyszewski 1926, 1930), attempting to resurrect the fading legend by setting his own pen to paper. Thanks to these memoirs and the published letters (Przybyszewski 1937, 1938), Przybyszewski remains a fascinating figure even today. There have been numerous biographical works popularizing the writer and his life (Helsztyński 1966; Kuncewiczowa 1982; Rogacki 1987; Dynak 1994; Więclawska 2015), as well as the lives of his women (Kossak 1975; Kolińska 1994; Sawicka 2006; Landis 2013; Dąbrowski 2015). His life, which could serve as a backdrop for his creative output and assist in the wider perception of his work, has become the more important, if not the only, symbol of this Young Poland writer. And although Przybyszewski's works were the subject of numerous studies over the last two decades alone (e.g. Dybel 2000; Stasiewicz 2001; Kosiński 2004; Ratuszna 2005, 2017; Kawalec 2007; Moskwini 2007; Gutowski 2008; Matuszek 2008; Woźniak 2011; Badowska 2011; Faxneld 2013, 2017; Linkner 2015; Mrówka 2016; Hess 2017; Brenskott 2018; Brzozowska-Dybizbańska 2018; Sell 2018; Sobieraj 2019), his name still brings to readers' minds terms such as Satanist, scandalmonger, erotomaniac, decadent, misogynist, Sad Satan, corrupter, epigone, depraver, alcoholic. But not a writer. He is fascinating as a picturesque figure, and in this sense, Przybyszewski deserves to be called popular. His work, however, is not popular at all. One can only wonder whether those who now like to wear fashionable t-shirts with Przybych's image and the advertising slogan: "Only for connoisseurs. A t-shirt with Stanisław Przybyszewski's image. The 'league of super-writers' series", are familiar with even a single prose poem or play written by the "super-writer". History has come full circle — once satellites, and now trend setters revel in the story of the Sad Satan, bragging about being part of the circle of his elite followers.

A shortage of new editions. No author exists without his or her work. This seemingly obvious statement encapsulates Przybyszewski's position. However, it should be noted that in his case this absence is not absolute — his texts are known from early 20th century editions and are available digitally in online library collections, but since then, they have not been accessibly presented nor edited in detail, as a result of which they have been commonly forgotten in Poland's contemporary literary culture. For comparison, an eight-volume collection of Przybyszewski's works was published in Germany between 1990 and 1999 (Przybyszewski 1990–1999). In Poland, there have been no editions that could legitimize discussions on the writer and sanction ("restore" may fit better here) his worth. His only works to have been published so far are the two plays: *Śluby* [*The Vows*] (Goławska-Stachowiak 2019) and *Gody życia* [*Nuptials of Life*] (Goławska 2014), the collections *Wybór pism* [*Selected Writings*] (Taborski 2006) and *Poematy prozą* [*Prose Poems*] (Matuszek 2003), and *Dzieci szatana* [*Satan's Children*] (Matuszek 1993).

The mostly unfavourable, shallow, and ignorant reception of Przybyszewski's works, already well-established during the author's life, persists, along with oft-repeated gossip garnished with scandal, outrage, and sensation. It does not mean, however, that Przybyszewski's works are not discussed today, but that, paradoxically, Przybyszewski is not popular at all. He attracts only a narrow group of literary scholars and is an example of an author who used to be popular in his time but whose work is not popular nowadays.

The ones responsible for this omission are Polish literature historians, scholars, and editors. It is necessary to make up for it as soon as possible, and the increasing chronological distance should be regarded as a desirable element that prevents one-dimensional opinions and enables a different view, embedded in the contemporary cultural context.

It is the editor that plays the key role in popularizing Przybyszewski's work, as it is the editor who provides the "material" that, after being individually processed, enables the reader to make up their own minds. Without the editor's work, the reader will not be able to go beyond what critics contemporary to Przybyszewski deemed "important" or "unimportant". At the same time, the reader will not recognize what the Polish culture has preserved from Przybyszewski's work in its memory, nor what it has glossed over or what it has repressed.

Editing is a challenging endeavour; it is done on desolate ground, a kind of battlefield between the author and his contemporary critics. Editors do not resurrect but can reconstruct the battle between both sides. They popularize literary works not by choosing one of the sides but by creating a space for yet another meeting. Not only the work itself but also the criticism of the work requires interpretation. Thus, editors, while making it possible to popularize a work, do not guarantee it. They are a necessary, albeit an insufficient, condition. Through the fruits of their labour, they enable a reading; however, it would be a mistake to believe that such a reading is absolutely innocent:

[...] we do not read in a vacuum; we usually [...] know what we take into our hands, we know something about the author, we received recommendations or warnings. Moreover, our reading is informed by patterns, historically shaped and common to the reader of a specific time and place. But the work [...] remains unknown to us. (Łukasiewicz 2017: 62–63)

Although the above-cited opinion by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz refers to translation, it is also true about editing. In the case of Przybyszewski, everything seems to be well-known — everything, that is, except his work.

Conclusion

How to exist in and out of pop culture? As far as Stanisław Przybyszewski is concerned, there is a lengthy list of factors that have determined his lack of popularity, including those that depended on the writer himself: his life, which got ahead of his literature; the gossip that circulated between his works; the unusual artistic manifesto and the vision of the impossible reader; or his failure to create a uniform artistic community with potential imitators. On the other hand, some of the blame for the lack of popularity of Przybyszewski's works can be pinned on the critics and their judgments made almost a century ago. The process of popularization can be also facilitated or hampered by the existence or non-existence of the work in readers' minds, its physical presence on bookstore shelves, and its common availability or absence. Here, the editor's work has a special role to play. However, the results of such efforts should be complemented by the work of designers, typesetters, publishers, and proof-readers,

i.e. those who create, as Paul Valéry described the book, the “perfect reading machine”. Thus created, “a work of art [...] has its own personality, bears the mark of a special spirit, and is created through strenuous efforts to maintain a balanced and conscious order” (Reuß 2017: 7). However, for it not to remain a creation only completed by the author, a creation that is complete but dead (Calasso 2018: 36), it requires its own audience. Only the reader can breathe life into the text provided by the editor — using their own imagination, by taking the book into their own hands.

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