

New Polish Queer Literature and its Anglosphere Reception

ABSTRACT

This article offers a theoretical perspective on the reception of new Polish queer literature in the Anglosphere as opposed to an “insider’s view”. The reception of queer literature is measured against the stereotype of Polish literature called “Polish school of poetry”. This stereotype when applied to queer literature interacts with the idea of Poland’s “belatedness” in LGBTQ emancipation which is normatively understood as a carbon-copy of Western models, and not as a unique path. Therefore, the Anglosphere reading strategies often rely on “exoticisation” and a certain “postcolonial gaze”. The case studies are two novels, Michał Witkowski’s *Lovetown* and a liminrophe case, a novel about Poland written in English by Tomasz Jędrowski, *Swimming in the Dark*. While in the former the political content is almost overlooked, in the latter the description of queer lives under communism seems brought to the forefront. I argue, however, that this vision in *Swimming in the Dark* does not surpass stereotypes and also is full of historical inaccuracies.

Keywords: literary reception, Polish queer literature, literary representations of communism, politics of translation

New Polish Queer Literature and Its Translations

POLISH CULTURE IS a minoritarian culture with regard to global culture, queer culture is a minoritarian culture with regard to dominant culture; when these two overlap, as in queer Polish culture expressions, does this produce a double marginalization? Or should we assume that one minoritarian culture is better equipped to understand another culture's minoritarian status? I use the term "new Polish queer literature" to refer to books, mostly novels, published after 2004 and authored by openly queer writers. These books are characterized by the presence and prominence of non-normative forms of desire and culture, like homosexuality and bisexuality. They have been influenced by theoretical works from international and local queer theory. The hypothetical list of such novels published from 2004 to 2020 surpasses a hundred and includes many genres. The genres range from postmodern highbrow novels to genre-specific works (e.g., detective novels), political fiction, historical novels about different periods etc., including "page-turner pulp". Nonetheless, if we consider the number of translated works from this group, it seems that "Polish queer literature" is marginal within the broader context of "Polish literature". In Poland, this literature has found its own channels, oscillating between "mainstream" and "queer niche", found various publishing houses specialising in queer literature, has its own media and bookshops, and is one of the few phenomena that sell right now, precisely because it is niche-targeted. It should be mentioned, however, that the selection of works that are translated from Polish is only partially regulated by the "free market" and dependent on the good will of foreign translators. Polish authorities know that Polish literature does not attract very much attention internationally and therefore needs promotional funding. Thus, the choice of books for translation is strategic. It is regulated by translation grants, and there is a certain policy of choosing books, where elements like political influences, success among Polish elites, commercial success, and "Polish-image-making" potential are balanced or intertwined. In short, the writers that have been translated, and that belong to this "new Polish queer" wave, are: Michał Witkowski – especially his book *Lovetown*, which has been translated

into more than ten languages, including English, and involved in a translation-promotion programme; Izabela Filipiak, whose poems have been translated into Italian; Bartosz Żurawiecki, whose postmodern threesome romance has been translated into German; Jacek Dehnel, whose two novels have been translated into English, although these novels do not strictly speaking belong to the category in question as they do not touch upon queer subjects; and most recently Remigiusz Rzyński and his literary reportage *Foucault in Warsaw*. We can add to this list Tomasz Jędrowski, whose recent novel *Swimming in the Dark* was written originally in English. If we wish to investigate the reception of recent Polish queer literature in the Anglosphere, we are thus left with Witkowski and Jędrowski. The list is short; however, the theoretical problems of such a reception seem interesting.

The Stereotype of Polish Literature in the Anglosphere

We cannot consider the reception of new Polish queer literature without situating this literature in a broader context. We need to understand how Polish literature is perceived in the UK, but also in the US. Apparently, there is a specific “shelf” for Polish books, or, simply put, a stereotype. It regulates what is translated and what becomes known and discussed of the translated works. The sources of this stereotype are historical and stem from mid-twentieth century high modernism. They are also connected to Polish exile literature, with its emphasis on ethics, anti-communism, and in many cases high morals or even religiousness and, finally, seriousness. This stereotype of Polish literature is the so-called “Polish school of poetry”. The term was coined by Czesław Miłosz (Łapiński 2012: 6). In the stereotyped version, Polish literature and culture *per se* became equated with such qualities as a) concern with history, b) ethic issues and the responsibility of the poet who “gives testimony” and is, essentially, a moralist, c) “high style” and the aesthetics of the sublime which entails d) reluctance to direct expressions of eroticism in favour of “elegance”. In some cases, the “Polish school of poetry” was even contrasted with American postmodern poetry of the quotidian, of banality, of mundane things and written in the everyday language or in

weird avant-garde languages (Cavanagh 2012; Carpenter 2012). Polish perspectives on the history of Polish poetry are quite different – post-war Polish poetry, not to mention postmodern poetry, always had a strong avant-garde and also “linguistic” wing. There are many poets of the “mundane”, the everyday, who use colloquial language. The qualities of the “Polish school of poetry” stereotype are also sometimes relegated to Polish prose. Up to some point, the recent success of Olga Tokarczuk (Booker and Nobel prize winner) could be viewed as positioning her works in this matrix. In short, there is a “permission” and an expectation, or a “shelf” for Polish literature in the American eye, which entails that this literature can be both “old-fashioned” and modernist, unlike the current American production. Exotic, so to speak.

Global Queer and Exotisation

On the other hand, we cannot consider the reception of Polish queer literature without looking into tendencies in current “queer culture”, and “queer gaze” in the Anglosphere. These imply not only literature or film reception, but also a generalised approach to culture, which stems from the fact that the English language is the *lingua franca* nowadays, and that it has also, for the most part, been the language of queer theory. This creates the disputable, yet quite common impression, not only among native English speakers, that queer experiences expressed in English language constitute a kind of “dominant model”. There is a “centre”, a “mainstream” of queer experiences, and “exotic margins”. This is a particular version of the post-colonial gaze.

The concept of “global gay” (Altman 1996; Martel 2013).¹ was originally not used for arts, but for life experiences and for the dominant notion of queer theory or gay studies. When I speak of “global gay art”, I mean to denote a work of art which uses at its core the construct of “universal (gay) story” which could take place “anywhere”. I am quoting these notions rather than taking them for granted, because I treat them suspiciously, i.e., I do not believe in “universality”, neither am I sure that the “same stories” happen “anywhere”, since this would imply that local context is not that important. I would rather argue that the actual

effect of these "global (gay) stories" is that they make us believe that there exists some kind of basic "universal" (gay) story which implies also a basic universal gay identity. This is sometimes deliberate, sometimes unintentional. This story, or these stories (love triangle with a woman, coming of age story, coming out stories, and so on), have been played out many times in the most visible (dominant) cultures; they are familiar. Perhaps, in a "globalised gay literary market", there is even a certain feeling of being "fed up" with having to listen to the same story repeatedly. It is here that the "marginal spice", or the concept of "exoticisation", comes into play.

Polish Minoritarian Culture Meets Queer Minoritarian Culture

Participants in Polish culture adopt various positions vis-a-vis such stereotypes, or, in other words, towards the "exoticised" (and reduced) image of Polish culture that nonetheless is somehow known outside of Poland. These positions vary from "we should be happy that we are at least known for something, and if this is what they want to hear from us, we should give it to them" to "we should challenge this stereotype and show precisely that which does not fall within the ambit of this stereotype". Such discussions are an example of the problem of "representation". In the case of the so-called "minoritarian culture", because Polish culture is considered minoritarian, these problems with regard to representation are structurally similar to the problems that gay and queer culture has with "representation". Should we be assimilationists or nonconforming? Is there a "good gay" image, or is it just exclusion and mainstreaming of a sanitised straight-acting heteronormative gay image? (Selfa 1996). The problem that the "insiders" of Polish culture have with the "outside" image returns in public debates and in cultural wars in Poland.

I would add that there could be a connection between queerness and an "outdated" literary style as in "the Polish school of poetry": it offers an opportunity for "Western" (queer) readers to confirm their stereotype of Poland and post-communist Central Europe as a "pre-gay" place, or as a place experiencing a belated passage from "pre-gay" to "gay". This

idea is once again based on a normativised view of gay emancipation understood as a global model which is challenged by local academics (Mizelińska & Kulpa 2012; Kulpa & Mizelińska 2011; Mizelińska & Kulpa & Stasińska 2012; Sobolczyk 2015a; Szulc 2018). In short, it could be said that the Polish model of emancipation did emerge a little later, drew upon some achievements of the “global emancipation model” and combined them with local contexts, and mixed “gay” and “post-gay” from the start, if you will. This seems to have been overlooked by the Western eye, so an artist can be successful at presenting “retro gay” or “pre-gay” (yet yearning to go “gay” in the global sense) in Poland by employing a modernist style which suggests that “their (i.e. Polish) culture has no language for that”; such a view seems consistent.

Postmodern Queer Vision of Communism Meets Anglosphere Eye in Lovetown

The novel *Lovetown* offers a retro-regard on communism from a queer perspective. It was the first work in Polish culture to do that. It also establishes a link between communist days and contemporary “globalised” gays in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Instead of re-employing modernist literature’s subtle language of euphemisms, it provided a colourful vocabulary of sex practices and introduced historical and contemporary gay slang. After fifteen years, it may rightfully be claimed that this novel changed Polish queer literature (and Polish literature as such). It launched the “third wave” of queer literature in Poland, and at the same time, in a way summed up many pre-modern queer novels by means of allusions and citations. It filtered the old expression and opened a new one. Let me give an example. One of the main characters describes his sexual relations with Russian soldiers under communism: “They pissed on me, three of them together, as I lay on the gravel, on the coal, the slag!” (Witkowski 2011: 46). Or: “I’d do each and every one. I’d be their whore, their widow...” (Witkowski 2011: 55).

Certainly, this kind of language is the antithesis of “Polish school of poetry”. It does not fit the dominant reception model of Polish culture in the Anglosphere eye. So, how does it perform within the matrix

of “global queer” literature? It could be said that this is also an expression of “exoticisation” (savage Polish “pre-gay” queens who do not know how to be “gay”). It is worth noting, however, that this novel a) was not originally written for non-Polish audiences, and definitely not with the intention to “please” them b) is not written in a “realistic” code, it rather presents (sexual) fantasies of queens, and c) interestingly camps the gloomy experience of communism and turns the oppressors (Russian soldiers stationed in Poland) into a dubious fetish. Elsewhere, I have discussed the Polish reception of *Lovetown* in a chapter on general models of reception of queer literature in Poland (Sobolczyk 2015b: 122–130). There, I argue that there is a difference between the Polish initial reception in the press and the later academic writing on this novel in Poland. There is also a difference between the Polish initial reception in the press and the reception of the English translation in Anglo-sphere media. Generally, the biggest issue and area of dissent – if not scandal – around the novel concerned the problems of representation of gay men in society. The question posed was: does this book help gay emancipation, or does it just fortify bad stereotypes about promiscuous effeminate queens? As one reviewer put it: “With such an apotheosised sado-masochistic, gutter-ish and aggressive homosexuality the writer does not disarm the conflict [between the mainstream straight world and gay men – P. S.], doesn’t make the two worlds come closer, on the contrary – he fortifies homophobia” (Nowacki 2005).

Queer scholar Błażej Warkocki argued that such a portrait of sexual predators and effeminate dirty queens is less offensive to the predominantly straight reader and Polish society as such, because it only confirms what they already believe, and that it would be more subversive to show middle class gay men in happy couples, not as foul margins, because this is what irritates the most. Interestingly, Warkocki used a concept borrowed from the English language to position this novel, “queer before gay”, implying that Polish culture first needs to establish a firm “gay identity” – i.e., middle class decent gay couple – to then be able to move into the discussion of perversions (Warkocki 2005: 328–330). Only a few critics, myself among them, pointed to literary qualities such

as style and humour. This early reception did not raise the issue of a completely innovative take on communism, neither was the overlooked critique of neoliberal transformation mentioned; these and other topics were addressed later, in academic studies.

In short, then, much of the reception was structured by the condition of Polish society back in 2005. The critics in the Anglosphere were certainly writing from a very different social position in relation to homosexuality. Neil Bartlett, writing for *The Guardian*, did not mention communism and therefore at first describes the book as "not political", and in the final paragraph as "political in a different way": "reassure yourself that this hilarious, scabrous, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued (and brilliantly translated) novel is essentially and life-enhancingly political – if by politics we mean who gets to live, and how" (Bartlett 2010). Nonetheless he did notice the "anti-bourgeois", as he calls it, critique of traditional (i.e., Western, I would say) "gay liberation". Richard Canning, writing for *The Independent*, noticed a certain satiation of "gay topics" in literature, at least in the West, because he problematizes the axis West–East (i.e., Central Europe): "Is anything about gay life now untold? In the West, it feels as if all bases are covered" (Canning 2010). He was conscious, however, of the perils of reading in the key of "same script, different cast": "It is of interest to foreign readers not simply because it looks at homosexuality in a different landscape" (Canning 2010). This *differentia specifica* of Witkowski's would be, again, not communism, because neither reviewer points towards the description of communism as the element that constitutes the difference between the narrative of Witkowski's work and that of other writers'. Instead, it would be the criticism of (gay) capitalism (Canning 2010). Interestingly, Viet Dinh, writing for the US *Lambda Literary*, did not notice anything political, nor anything "social" (apart from Witkowski's critique of "plastic gays"). He noticed Witold Gombrowicz's legacy and polymorphous narration (Dinh 2012). In sum, the general tone in these reviews is positive, yet it would be hard to claim – especially from a Polish perspective – that these readers notice any significant differences between Polish queerness, as described by Witkowski, and the queerness of their own cul-

tures, not to mention the historio-political dimension. It rather seems as if they have read what they were able to read without any additional research, and therefore I would argue that these readings boil down to a version of searching for, and finding, the “global queer”.

Easy-To-Digest Communism Enters the Queer Canon?

In 2018, a prestigious UK publishing house published the debut novel by Tomasz Jędrowski, *Swimming in the Dark*, subsequently republished in the US by another prestigious publisher, and republished once again in the UK in 2020. The book was warmly reviewed and received numerous accolades. In 2020, the novel was published in Polish translation. We have a limitrophe case here: the author was born in West Germany to Polish parents, speaks Polish, and while his book is written in English about Poland and can be said to belong to “English language LGBTQ literature”, it should also be incorporated into Polish queer literature. This limitrophe case generates interesting discrepancies in the reception in Poland and the Anglosphere – discrepancies that situate it differently in the respective (queer) literary canons, and offer an opportunity to discuss and question a variety of important social problems.

Let us look briefly at these discrepancies of reception. Legendary gay writer Edmund White delivered the blurb: “A lyrical exploration of the conflict between gay love and political conformity. Jedrowski is an authentic new international star” (Jedrowski 2020, blurb). I also find this opinion by Jessica Shattuck relevant for the construction of my forthcoming polemic:

The surprise of “Swimming in the Dark” lies in its intimate ambivalence – that it captures the pleasures of everyday life behind the Iron Curtain as well as the privations. A beautiful, captivating love story that deepened my understanding of life in communist era Poland (“Swimming in the Dark” 2020).²

Equally relevant is this opinion from a review by Marcus Field:

“Swimming in the Dark” has all the ingredients of the best coming-of-age gay love stories, but with its 1980s Eastern Bloc setting providing enough edginess to make it feel entirely original. Ludwik and Janusz’s arguments about opposing political systems are as relevant today as they were back then (Field 2020).

Lastly, editor Matthew Bates, in an interview on the LGBTQ literary canon,³ suggested this novel as a possible candidate for entering the canon (Bates 2020).

Polish reviewers, by contrast, offer a different reading. I will refer to two Polish reviews, both by acclaimed critics. Michał Paweł Urbaniak wrote for the prestigious review *ArtPapier*:

In the aspect of storytelling, compared to many novels built on a similar scheme, “Swimming in the Dark” is not very surprising. However, this aspect makes it strongly universal. (...) He uses tropes somewhat fixed to literature about sexual minorities. It is the same sad story, only the setting is different (Urbaniak 2020).⁴

Wojciech Szot is a former publisher of queer literature and a literary critic, who ruthlessly commented:

Promoted in the media as the eighth wonder, and when you read it, it is a thin and naive novel, moreover written in a really awful language at times. (...) I consider it a weak, stereotypical easy read that I could never recommend to anyone. (...) It is full of clichés and naiveties and moreover flavoured with sentimentalism emanating from a banal schmaltz (...) corny tone full of redundant metaphors and naive comparisons (Szot 2020)⁵

I must say I sympathise entirely with Szot’s review.

Many of the qualities I have mentioned above as belonging to the “Polish school of poetry” are also the qualities of Tomasz Jędrowski’s novel: the apparent concern with history and “sublime high style” espe-

cially. This “high style” leads to euphemisms of erotica which stand in sharp contrast to *Lovetown*. Szot also laughed at this style of expressing eroticism, downgrading the apparent “high style” (“you possessed me and I possessed you”) with a colloquial comment: “If you don’t understand that, he means that the guys have just tapped a classic ‘flip-flop’” (Szot 2020). After almost two decades of new Polish postmodern queer literature full of direct homoeroticism, Jędrowski’s language seems not only outdated, but unintentionally laughable.

My argument is that this novel was originally written for readers in the Anglosphere, readers who know little about Poland and communism, at best have a bunch of stereotypes at hand, and that the novel is intended to please these readers by confirming the author’s “knowledge” of “gay life under communism in Central Europe”. I would like to use the postcolonial concept of “exoticisation”, introduce the concept of “artistic cynicism”, and adopt the concept of “bait”.⁶ Let me show how these concepts work together. This path of interpretation is, as any interpretation, quite hypothetical. It might seem hard to discriminate between “artistic cynicism” and “works of art”, this distinction could even be said to be an outdated demarcation. I would, however, strategically use this opposition to discriminate between works of art which a) foremostly aim to be a successful market product vs. works created out of the necessity of expression; b) in order to achieve that, follow some prescription vs. works that depend rather on the creator’s will than on some “tried and tested” script; c) try to please the recipients by giving them what they know and like vs. works that count on recipients wishing to broaden their artistic and cognitive experiences; d) respectively, mostly confirm the cognitive stereotypes of the recipients and, when introducing novelties, do it mainly to add “spice” or “colour” vs. works that are not afraid of placing ambiguous ideas or styles or information at the core, not only on the margin. This is a paradigmatic distinction of “popular literature” and “literary art” in high modernism and there are certainly many cases that blur this distinction. I would argue that Jędrowski uses a postmodern so-called retrostalgic (a combination of “nostalgic” and “retro”, i.e., nostalgic for everything retro or vintage)

strategy of imitating “highbrow” (“highly artistic”) modernist works. This strategy is nonetheless used to design a well-crafted product that fulfils the need of reading something “artsy”, yet at a low cost; it also fulfils the retrostalgic taste. It is a “poor pastiche”, so to say.

If we take out the local context, Poland under communism, we are left with a flat “universal” love story, a love story that we would be able to find in literally thousands of gay narratives, books, movies and TV series alike. Without this “historical social background”, the novel loses depth and effect. If it is anyhow different, then, it must be different owing to the background. I argue that this is what sets Polish readers and “international” – or perhaps Anglosphere – readers apart. The above-mentioned voices from non-Polish readers attest that what those readers found valuable was the historical and political background (or context). Jessica Shattuck states that the novel describes the world behind the Iron Curtain with its “pleasures” and “privations” in the everyday. This suggests that she believes these descriptions to be “accurate” (realistic). In other words, comparing this reading with my above-mentioned model, she reads the novel in the code of “high art” that is expected to broaden the reader’s knowledge and cognition rather than confirm stereotypes. Moreover, it seems that she, in her reading, has somehow (unintentionally) suspended the fact that she is reading a work of fiction which does not necessarily have to represent history “accurately”. Likewise, for Marcus Field, it is the “1980s Eastern Bloc” setting, as he calls it, that creates tension or “edginess” in the work of art. It is not surprising then, that he concludes that this “setting” and “tension” make the novel “entirely original”. Now, there are two important factors to tag on to my model. The way I have formulated it above is basic and suggests that “tourist readers”, as I call them, voluntarily assume this position. There are, however, cases in which those readers just cannot verify the knowledge that they are receiving via the work of art, in our context the representation of everyday life under communism in Poland. They accept in good faith what they are given. How they are convinced to do that is a question both of artistic construction (which overlaps with what I call “artistic cynicism”) and of

social psychology, i.e., what the conditions that make us believe one person and what it takes for us to mistrust them are (I have elaborated on these topics with the use of social psychology in my own theory of reception: Sobolczyk 2018: 95–121). Roughly, I would suggest that in our case, some part of the job is done by the Polish name of the author, which gives him legitimacy as an interpreter of the Polish context; secondly, I would mention Jędrowski's knowledge of Warsaw topography which is his strongest asset in recreating the "background". Moreover, it seems that for so-called "tourist readers", this novel is not constructed as "centre + margins", i.e., familiar love story as centre and "everyday life under communism" as "background" or "small detail"; they tend to see them as equally important and deeply interwoven. It is from the Polish reader's perspective that these "details" appear as flat, barely sketched, in the background and in most cases inaccurate.

What I have argued here implies that these non-Polish readers – who I have suggested are the novel's primary target readership or audience – are to some extent being "duped". Certainly, it is not their fault if they are. Nonetheless, this leads me to a more difficult question, namely that of whether the writer was consciously seeking to "dupe" his non-Polish readers. I am not able to provide a firm answer to this question. I am convinced that Jędrowski wrote the novel with an English-language readership in Western Europe and North America in mind. This, however, implies neither that he was consciously misinforming his audience, nor that he was adapting "accurate" information to an easier-to-understand scheme. Out of these two options, I think that what Jędrowski sometimes does, is the latter. In some cases, nonetheless, I am nonetheless prone to believe that Jędrowski himself lacked sufficient or "accurate" knowledge of the details. Jędrowski cannot impress Polish readers with his description of the historical and political context, he did however impress British and American audiences with precisely that. We must, however, not forget the writer's "right to be incorrect" in a work of fiction. I am trying to say that the comparative analysis of the reviews, Polish and English, shows a difference of degree: Polish critics treat the novel as fiction – with its right to misstate facts. Hence, the Polish critics situate fiction

in the centre and historical data in the periphery, they read the work as a "fictional novel" containing some historical background in it, while the Anglosphere critics seem to view it the other way round: rather as a source of knowledge – a reportage almost – with some possibly fictional fillings.

Is There an Appropriate Style for the Description of Polish Queerness?

It is hard to decide if parts of Jędrowski's style – or even the whole novel – are unintentional flaws, or if the style is perhaps a conscious "marketing" strategy which recycles "Polish school of poetry" because it guarantees success. In support of the second option, I will mention a few paragraphs in the second chapter where the narrator mentions some Polish books that he has read. The list begins with Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo vadis*, then the narrator mentions Karolina, a friend from university, who recommended and lent him books by Miłosz, Szymborska and Ryszard Kapuściński.⁷ These four authors have something in common: three of them have received a Nobel prize, and they are all famous in the US (*Quo vadis* was even filmed in Hollywood), and the rest of the world. All of them write in this "sublime-ethical" code (although not exclusively). Curiously enough, this list of reading matters is mentioned by a student of philology (although it is never specified which strand of philology). At the time in which the novel is set, Szymborska's poems were already set reading in primary school programs, Miłosz's pre-war poems were at least mentioned as part of pre-war avant-garde movements, and Kapuściński was a popular author. Therefore, we could conclude that it is unlikely that students of philology would not have heard those names and needed special counselling on them. However, the logic of this paragraph, as I see it, is not "realistic", or "accurate", it is not supposed to correspond to factual Polish experiences of the early 80s. Why does the author not mention any other interesting Polish writers who were also highly popular at that precise time, among them Białoszewski? Or Edward Stachura, who was indeed an idol of students of that era, especially mutinous ones? No, the logic of this paragraph is to situate the novel in the familiar code of "Polish school of poetry".

Conclusion: Does Historical Accuracy Matter?

So, to answer the core question, that of the relation between inside and outside perspectives, I shall examine in the following paragraphs a few motifs and places in the novel, situating them between the perspective of "how it is constructed for an international reader", and the perspective of "how this novel incorporates into the canon of Polish queer literature". To begin with, the novel includes several paragraphs constructed as small summary notes that explain or resume some aspect of Polish history or current situation (Jędrowski 2020: 105–106). These notes are accurate and seem to be adaptations of encyclopaedic entries, which are palpable even in their style. In general, it seems that these notes are directed primarily at readers who know little about Poland. There is one motif, though, which can be praised for its accuracy. In chapter two, Jędrowski describes a student camp in the countryside where are taught agriculture. In communist era Poland it was common practice to send students to experience agriculture or factory production work so that they did not grow too detached from "real socialist issues", from the "real man of work". The description of the camp, even if stylistically not picturesque, is accurate. From the perspective of the Polish queer literary canon, however, this is no novelty. We have, for example, a novel by Jerzy Nasierowski (under the penname Jerzy Trębicki), entitled *Jasnozielono-ciemno* [Light green – dark] (Trębicki 1981) which portrays student camps. In 2015, in a collection of previously unpublished narratives by Miron Białoszewski, *Obóz ZMP* [Association of Polish Youth Camp] was included (Białoszewski 2015: 17).

My point is to show that some motifs, which seem "fresh" to outside readers, are already well-known to inside readers. Likewise, the idea of confronting two lovers who are on opposite poles politically, more precisely pro-communist vs. anti-communist dissidence (close to the Solidarity Movement), is not a new trope in the Polish context. There is some similarity between Jędrowski's novel and Tadeusz Olszewski's novel *Zatoka ostów* [Thistle Bay], written in the 80s and prepared for publication at the time, but paused and finally published in 2008 (Olszewski 2008). Finally, this concept of two lovers at political oppo-

sites might seem familiar (and “translatable”) in the eyes of British readers and possibly other readers in the world, given that it is such a popular trope, used, for example, as the main axis in Stephen Frear’s famous film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). The exaggerated vision of communism’s horrors might be appealing, especially to audiences in the US, where “communism” still seems to be a slur of some magnitude, and notwithstanding the homophobia of communist system. There is another “bait” for American readers, an interesting one, namely the use of the figure of James Baldwin (mentioned in the novel), but a discussion of that would require more space than is available here.

In this article, I have highlighted interesting differences between two receptions of two novels with the use of concepts such as “minoritarian culture”, “global gay” and “insider/outsider perspective”. I believe that some of my ideas might be useful also in the studies of reception of other than Polish (queer) “small literatures”. Coming back to the question “Does historical accurateness matter to Polish audiences?”, my conclusion is that it wouldn’t matter at all if the novel was published only in Polish. Some critics would point to errors, but they would focus mostly on the literary aspects of fiction (“Is the story good?”). And this is what we find in Polish reviews. These reviews were however written with awareness of the book also having been made available to international audiences, and this opened up quite a different reader reaction in the Polish audience: “How do they see us?”.

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NOTES

1. In a response to that text David Halperin stated: “I certainly agree that the United States is no model for the rest of the world, what with its ceaseless hysteria over sex and its almost genocidal treatment of sexual dissidents – although the extraordinary, if intermittent, vibrancy of lesbian/gay sub-cultures in the US represents a valuable by-product of the social and political mobilisation which such a hostile environment necessitates” (Halperin 1996). What Martel writes about Central Europe, Poland and Czechoslovakia is sometimes incorrect, e.g., he writes that homosexuality was legalised there after 1989 (in Poland it was legalised in 1932, in Czechia in 1961, in Slovakia in 1962).
2. This American writer’s opinion is not assigned to any journal, I therefore understand this too as a “blurb”. Certainly, blurbs are ordered (and paid for) by publishing houses, so it comes as no surprise that they are positive. However, it is a fair assumption that authors with a reputation are more or less directly expressing their true opinions, or at least take into account that they might also be valued.
3. I feel obliged to comment that this vision of “LGBTQ Literary Canon” is of a purely Anglosphere canon.
4. My translation. Nonetheless, the critic – finally – values this novel as “mature” and “promising”. The reviewer in *Replika* (a bimonthly Polish LGBTQ magazine) is ambivalent too. While he praises some aspects, he nonetheless adds (my translation): “This might be too much romanticism for some readers, and later it’s a novel like nobody writes today, old school, no postmodern tricks, no ironic distance, serious and with big emotions. You can laugh it down or you can let yourself get into the swing of it. I forgave the bloated schmaltz (Kurc 2020): 60.
5. My translation.
6. I have borrowed this concept from new media language, where “link bait” refers to content that is carefully designed to attract people to click on a link; it can be connected to “share triggers”, which is content designed to make people want to share it.
7. I am using the Polish edition (Jędrowski, 2020): 37, 40.