POLISH LITERATURE IN ENGLISH
TRANSLATION 1999–2009

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ABSTRACT

In the period under consideration 265 Polish titles (poetry, drama, prose fiction, reportage and memoirs) were published in English. Their publishers were mostly academic presses and small independent publishers, often subsidised by the EU or the Polish Book Institute. The analysis of the titles leads to several conclusions. First, the image of Polish literature construed on the basis of the available translations did not reflect the situation on the Polish book market. The percentage of translated poetry volumes and memoirs devoted to the Holocaust and the Second World War was much higher than the percentage of such titles published in Poland. Second, the beginning of the decade concentrated on classics and memoirs, whereas towards the end of the period more and more contemporary prose titles were being published. Third, the increased interest in Polish prose among the British publishers was not reflected among their American counterparts. The article is accompanied by a bibliography of English translations of Polish literature published in the years 1999–2009.

Keywords: Polish literature in English translation, reception of Polish literature in the United Kingdom and the United States.
Abstract: In the period under consideration 265 Polish titles (poetry, drama, prose fiction, reportage and memoirs) were published in English. Their publishers were mostly academic presses and small independent publishers, often subsidised by the EU or the Polish Book Institute. The analysis of the titles leads to several conclusions. First, the image of Polish literature construed on the basis of the available translations did not reflect the situation on the Polish book market. The percentage of translated poetry volumes and memoirs devoted to the Holocaust and the Second World War was much higher than the percentage of such titles published in Poland. Second, the beginning of the decade concentrated on classics and memoirs, whereas towards the end of the period more and more contemporary prose titles were being published. Third, the increased interest in Polish prose among the British publishers was not reflected among their American counterparts. The article is accompanied by a bibliography of English translations of Polish literature published in the years 1999–2009.

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The 1999–2009 decade can be viewed as a period when Poland drew nearer to West European countries. Among the changes brought about by Poland’s accession to the NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004 we can certainly list the growth in importance of the Polish language (Miodunka 2006). When Poland entered the EU, Polish became the Union’s biggest Slavic language and the sixth language with respect to the number of native speakers. As the Polish language joined the official languages of the EU, there appeared an increasing need to translate into and from Polish. Thinking about literary translations, we could pose a question whether the rise in the international value of the Polish language has had any impact on
the position of Polish literature on foreign book markets. Undoubtedly, the largest and the most influential of those markets is the English-language one, hence the present discussion focuses on the works of Polish literature which appeared in English translation from 1999 to 2009.

As the position of Polish literature on British and American book markets depends to a large extent on the general situation of foreign literatures translated into English, I would like to outline a broader context in which translated works function before I elaborate on translations of Polish literature. To sketch the broader context I will rely on three independent reports investigating the position of translated literatures in the English-speaking world; these reports were published in 2004, 2007 and 2009.

**Translated literatures on American and British book markets**

According to the report prepared for the European Commission in 2004, the number of literary translations in Europe started to fall, rather than to rise given globalisation. While the year 1980 saw 52,070 translations, in 1994 only 50,343 translated titles were published. Within these numbers, more than 50% of the books translated globally were translations from English, whereas all other languages translated into English constituted only 6%. The report closes with a future forecast: “the proportion of the English language will be expanding” and with German and French coming second and third “these top three languages will account for three out of every four translations worldwide” (European Commission 2004: 53). The analysis of the European book market concluded with the observation that “the ‘double nature’ of books as an economic product and an item of cultural value (and identity) can be seen as assuming a new and very real prominence” (2004: 54). It was pointed out that publishers had become increasingly aware of the costs the publication of foreign titles entailed because the prices for translation rights had risen significantly and the financial risk associated with publishing translations from less prominent languages was greater than before.

More recent data can be found in the report prepared by Miha Kovač and Rüdiger Wischenbart, which was presented at the London Book Fair in 2010. The authors of the research focused on best-selling book patterns in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, analysing top 10 best-seller lists. Their findings showed that translations from English constituted on aver-
age one third of the top segment, with some variations across different countries. In Sweden, for instance, more than two thirds of best-selling authors wrote in Swedish, while at the other end of the scale, in Poland, Slovenia and Spain, “domestic writers seem to have a much harder time finding a large home base among readers” (Kovač and Wischenbart 2009: 11–12). Spain, Poland and Italy were the most open book markers, whereas the UK and France belonged to markets “most difficult to be penetrated by translations” (2009: 16). The most disconcerting conclusion of the report suggested that, even though various authors from smaller countries, such as Denmark or Portugal, did occasionally appear on European best-seller lists, “not a single writer from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, or Serbia entered the top segment in the ‘West,’ as if 1989 had never happened” (2009: 26). Hence, the survey concluded that the English language was both “a bottleneck and a driving force:” entering a UK best-seller list was a privilege for only a very small number of translated authors, yet those translations into English acted as an important “launch pad” for their international careers. However, as a rule this privilege was denied to writers from Central and Eastern Europe, who had virtually no access to the “exclusive club” formed by West European authors (2009: 31).

The results of the third research, this time of a worldwide scope, were published in 2007 by the PEN Association and Institut Ramon Llull under the telling title “To Be Translated or Not To Be.” This extensive report aimed to remind us that translation is “the lifeblood which sustains and nurtures literatures” and makes the dialogue between them possible (PEN 2007: 12). The research analysed the statistical data for 2004, when the total number of books published in English worldwide was 375,000, with new translations amounting to 14,440, which constituted a little more than 3% of all books available for sale. Most of those translations were non-literary: textbooks or computer manuals. When it came to literary translations, only 874 titles were published in the United States, many of them retranslations of the classics.

The report also included statistical details about fiction books translated into English from different languages and published in the US between 2000 and 2006. There were 13 titles translated from Polish (average of 2.6 per year) and placed Poland behind France – 52, Italy – 39, Germany/Austria/Switzerland – 36, and Russia – 29, but for instance before Norway and Spain – both 12, Greece – 8, Hungary – 7, and Slovakia, Lithuania and