

Relationships between Polish authors and publishers and their verbal expressions in correspondences from the late 19th century

Teresa Świąćkowska

University of Warsaw

Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies

The approach to the relationships between authors and publishers in this paper is part of a broader interdisciplinary research on the history of copyright.¹ It analyses among other things the correspondence of Polish authors and publishers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of the correspondence that the analysis is based on has already been published, especially letters from authors to publishers. As for letters written by publishers, I have collected several hundreds of manuscripts from various archives. The project aims to answer the question how authors and publishers understood copyright and what practical role copyright played in publishing. Today, however, I will focus on the relationships between authors and publishers in the light of their correspondence.

There are two dominant and mutually conflicting views on the relationship between authors and publishers in the history of arguments and discussions of literary property and copyright law. Supporters of a stronger protection of copyright see a common interest of authors and publishers in strengthening the property rights. The imaginary community of interests of authors and publishers is rhetorically reinforced by a common enemy, the pirate, the thief of literary or intellectual property.

Supporters of limited copyright protection highlight the power relations between the publisher and the author. They claim that the author usually has a weaker (negotiating) position, which the publisher exploits by paying the author only a small part of the proceeds of his or her work. Such an asymmetrical relationship between the author and the publisher is also a frequent literary motif and a stereotypical figure of literary criticism. Goethe famously said that all publishers are the devil's seed, and there must be a separate hell especially for them. Another well-known theme is the writer living in poverty and dying in misery and the publisher accumulating capital through the publication of the writer's works, often after his or her death.

These two images of the relationship between the author and publisher refer, of course, only to certain situations arising from the specific positions of the author and publisher in the field of literary production.

¹ It is a three-year project financed by the Polish National Science Center

Using Bourdieu's conceptual tools we could say that the main factors influencing the positions of power in the field of literary production are symbolic capital and economic capital. The publisher can hold a dominating position when there is a clear asymmetry between the publisher and the author regarding access to economic capital which is not counterbalanced by high symbolic capital on the author's side. On the other hand, it is most likely that both parties can realize their interests when the positions of power are more or less balanced.

In addition to these two typical relationships, a whole range of other ones are possible, depending on the specific conditions which influence the possibility of accumulation of these two kinds of capital, like the structure of the publishing market, its degree of monopolization and the market supply of authors' labour power. It is also important whether there are actors in the field of publishing who operate in a non-market way, like subsidies from other sources for both the publication of books and the work of writers, such as private and institutional patronage, or individual estates of authors (Lahire, 2015).

Which were the contexts and conditions that influenced the development of the relationships between Polish authors and publishers in the second half of the nineteenth century? First of all, these relationships developed in a sphere of Polish culture and language which extended across three different administrative regimes of the partitioning powers Russia, Prussia and Austria and was divided by territorial borders and tariffs. This meant not only different regulations in the field of copyright law but, more importantly for Polish authors and publishers, different censorship regimes. In Galicia, under Austrian rule, censorship was much milder than in the Kingdom of Poland, under Russian rule. Texts which would not pass through censorship in Warsaw (Kingdom of Poland) could be printed in Cracow and Lviv (Galicia), and even in St. Petersburg, depending on the political climate and the person holding the post of censor. This influenced the choice of publisher.

Paradoxically, the publishing market grew most rapidly in the Kingdom of Poland, although it had the most severe censorship. This was due to the fact that the Kingdom's economy was growing rapidly in this period and Warsaw, home of the largest publishing houses, was the wealthiest city in the Polish speaking territories.

The authors preferred to publish their books at the large publishing houses in Warsaw, because these paid best and were prestigious having already published the works of popular writers. However, when the authors expected trouble with censorship in Warsaw they chose publishers in Cracow and Lviv. Most popular however was the publication of two versions: a censored one in Warsaw and an unabridged one in Galicia, because in this way an author could earn more. Administrative and territorial divisions made it difficult to create a publishing monopoly. Many authors, especially the more popular ones, sold the permission to reprint their works in the other two partitions right after the release of the first edition or at some later

time. This was possible because in this period the first editions of literary texts were usually published in installments in the press. The publisher of the first edition generally agreed to reprints of the work in papers in the other two partitions on the condition that the first edition would be published a little ahead of any reprints. Since tariff borders and censorship hampered press distribution beyond the border of one partition, publishers mainly cared about exclusivity in their principal area of distribution.

It often happened that one publisher would buy the right to the first edition in installments while after the end of printing it in a magazine a direct competitor would buy the right to publish the book which would cost less than the first edition in installments.

As mentioned above, the Polish publishing market developed rapidly, but for most of the period under research, the concentration of capital was not yet high enough to allow publishers to buy the exclusive rights to works. The purchase of exclusive property rights was an exception. Even purchases of rights for periods of several years did not happen often. Most common were contracts for the first edition with a fixed circulation figure. Authors worked together with many publishers at the same time. Popular authors published at a dozen or even dozens of publishers in the course of their literary careers. Publishers competed for texts, especially those written by the most popular authors, which strengthened the negotiating position of the latter.

On the other hand, this position was undermined by competition from other writers. The period under research was characterized by an enormous overproduction of intellectuals, many young people did not find work after graduation from schools and universities and tried to make a living from literature. Only a few actually succeeded, however, and usually only in the second half of their writing careers. Many authors who were unable to make a living from literary work took up additional work, most often journalistic and editorial work. The difficult personal financial situation of authors additionally undermined their negotiating position, as they were more likely to give in to publishers' demands when urgently needed money.

There was no Polish state, so there was no patronage of the kind of state institutions which usually support authors. There were indeed various private associations which undertook initiatives to support Polish literature, mainly by organizing literary contests, but they did not have large financial resources. In addition to commercial publishers, a number of associational publishing initiatives came into being, but although they were ready to publish the works of less popular or aspiring authors, in the long run they could not guarantee them good royalties.

The correspondence between authors and publishers shows a wide range of styles, from formal and businesslike to individual or even very personal, writing about situations and

experiences from daily life.

When authors wrote to publishers or editors of magazines they most frequently wrote about matters related to publishing. When publishers wrote to authors they asked them to write works, ordered works from them, often on a given subject, asked for permission to reprint or wanted to buy the rights to the next edition. Authors in turn offered publishers works which were finished, had been barely begun or were even only planned.

Much of the correspondence deals with details of publishing, such as the arrangement of texts, illustrations, or proof-reading. One of the most frequently discussed topics was royalties, their negotiation and enforcement, as well as letters of acknowledgment of receipt. The correspondence shows that there were different kinds of tensions between both sides stemming from unfulfilled expectations, conflicting interests, or uncertainty. One of the most difficult thing for aspiring authors was to make first contact to a publisher and offer their works. The correspondence shows the authors' insecurity, especially regarding remuneration.

Authors, and not only young ones, also found it embarrassing to repeatedly have to ask the publisher for information regarding the decision about publication when a publisher left an author's offer unanswered for a long time. Some publishers, in turn, were embarrassed at dealing with popular and respected writers in situations where they felt they offered lower royalties than the writer expected. Sometimes an author, like the very popular novelist Kraszewski who came from a wealthy landowners' family, made it clear that he was offended by having to "bargain" about literature.

Authors and publishers quite often had conflicting demands regarding remuneration and negotiated them. Sometimes the publishers agreed to the demands of the authors, sometimes both sides made concessions and settled for a compromise, but most often the publisher had the last word. Publishers justified the price by an economic calculation. In the letters we can find sentences like: we cannot give more than this, or categorical statements like: for works of that kind this is how much we pay.

Some publishers had fixed rates per line or per printed sheet. Such flat fees were a standard practice in the editorial offices of magazines and for lesser works. When associational publishers negotiated royalties, they used moral arguments and tried to persuade authors to give them their works at a lower price or free of charge.

Authors, on the other hand, justified their demands with the amount of work involved, the large amount of preliminary research which was necessary, the amount of time that it took them to write the work, or simply by claiming that their existence was threatened by lack of money. They usually did not refer to the artistic value of their own works but they did make this kind of assessment when they recommended works by other writers to publishers. Sometimes, however, they stressed that their own work was original. Some letters asking for

outstanding royalties or advances were dramatic. Authors wrote that they lived in misery, that they were poor, that they had to make downpayments, that the bailiff was after them, that they were stuck in some place and could not get out because they did not have the money to return home.

The advance was one of the standard forms of remuneration. For many authors who were trying to make a living from writing, an advance was often the only rescue when they had no money. It was also a heavy burden, however, if the author for any reason could not meet his or her obligations. A recurrent theme in the correspondence are therefore publishers' dunning letters to authors who are late with the submission of their texts. If the dunning letter did not help publishers also threatened to withhold royalties.

Tensions related to deadlines appeared most often when authors decided to start printing a novel in installments and the work was not ready yet. This meant that successive installments had to be written while previous one were in print or had already been published. This was stressful for both sides. Some serial novels were never finished, others suffered from long breaks in publication.

Unpleasant situations also occurred when a novel which had been paid in advance did not pass censorship and the publisher demanded the return of remuneration. Sometimes a censor rejected a substantial part of the work, and the publisher then sought to change the conditions of an existing agreement. There were also conflicts when works for which an advance had been paid were rejected because of internal censorship.

In their letters, authors quite often accused publishers of typographical errors, excessive editorial intervention or internal censorship. Textual changes caused the most severe accusations against publishers. Boleslaw Prus for example felt deeply hurt when the editors of the magazine "Kraj" printed an article of his with clumsy corrections which changed his pronunciation. He wrote that he had been disgraced as a writer. After this event, the writer did not allow them to make any changes in his texts.

Conflicts usually ended up in some agreement. In the case of more severe conflicts it sometimes took years until both sides were willing to work together again.

Of course, between conflicts, relationships were correct and often friendly. Publishers organized literary salons which were regularly frequented by writers, bestowed various small favours on authors, and helped them out of serious, usually financial, trouble.

The thing that has been joining both sides together until today is that both the symbolic and the economic value of the work is created jointly by the author and the publisher. Symbolic capital is created not only by the text but also by the prestige of the publisher, by the marketing of the book, and by the promotion of the writer. Authors and publishers need each other, and both sides are well aware of this. The sharing of profits however remains contested

ground.

References to income disparities, sometimes in ironic form, popped up even when both sides seemed to be satisfied with the cooperation. Boleslaw Prus began a letter to his biggest publisher with the following words: "Dear bloodsucker! ... Please send me, if you please, 50 rs." At the end of the letter he wrote: "I recommend myself to your prayers, my dear billionaire, and embrace you cordially."

For authors the most difficult period was the initial one when they still had to make a name for themselves. They had to carry the entire burden of the initial investment in the creation of a brand as an author. This meant several years of life in poverty, humiliations associated with the search for patronage, and artistic concessions to publishers. Wladyslaw Reymont, who later went on to receive the Nobel prize, wrote that this was the worst period in his life: endless wandering from publisher to publisher, and several years of homelessness. And he was one of those whose talent was recognized by his publisher right from the start. In his memories he wrote bitterly: "They see a talent in me, those decent catholic monkeys...".

The situation of authors usually improved with increasing popularity. Having gained some reputation they could transfer this symbolic capital into economic one. While aspiring writers agreed to the royalties proposed by publishers, well-known writers often negotiated conditions sometimes by playing out competing publishers against each other. But even they were not always satisfied with the royalties. The publishing market was dominated by a few large companies who were interested in keeping royalties low enough to ensure large profits to themselves.

In this situation, wealthy philanthropists were of great help to authors. People like Wawelberg and Natanson who wanted to make literature more accessible and support authors invested in cheap mass editions of the works of popular authors. All profits from sales went into royalties for the authors. It turned out that such remuneration was much higher than what publishers had previously offered them. The investors did not lose anything, at worst some interest on the capital they had invested. Such non-profit oriented investments were not only a real financial assistance to authors, but above all strengthened the negotiating position of popular Polish writers towards publishers. They helped, among others, to introduce a new standard in the negotiations on royalties, calculating them based on profits from the sale of the work.