

Research On The Literary Cycle

In Poland

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Research on the narrative cycle was initiated by Russian Formalists as early as the 1970s. In Poland, however, this issue did not spark much interest. It was only in the 1990s that scholars began to turn their attention to themes associated with cyclical works, although their research was mainly confined to the poetic cycle. Wiesława Wantuch became particularly preoccupied with this subject. In her text *On the Cycle of Lyric Poetry (O poetyce cyklu lirycznego)*¹ she not only defines the criteria for the cycle in a poetic context, but also evokes all available theories (including those of Stefania Skwarczyńska and Janusz Sławiński)² and ultimately offers her own definition of the poetic cycle:

The poetic cycle is a composition pulled between two poles: it strives towards closure, exposing specific properties of its structure, which is not the sum of its parts, and towards the autonomy of each individual work entering into the array. Depending on which of these tendencies prevails over the other, it becomes possible to identify three main types of cyclical systems: concentric, linked, and annular (ring-shaped).³

Wantuch's text also provides an overview on the subject of the cycle as a basis for composition. Following Jerzy Ziomek, Wantuch recalls that the cycle is defined by its "fragmentary quality, a kind of game between autonomy and coherence on both levels of its structure: each work is a closed whole, but nonetheless is an indispensable element displaced from the total composition. These factors establish a certain compositional dynamic that informs the integration of various genres within the category."⁴ According to Wantuch, "various tensions between the lyric and the epic determine the form and coherence of the cycle".

¹ W. Wantuch, *O poetyce cyklu lirycznego*, in: *Miejsca wspólne. Szkice o komunikacji literackiej i artystycznej*, ed. Edward Balcerzan and Seweryna Wysłouch, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1985, p. 42-62.

² See Stefania Skwarczyńska, *Wstęp do nauki o literaturze*, Warszawa 1954, p. 458; *Hasło cykl powieściowy, cykl literacki, cykl nowelistyczny*, in: *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. Janusz Sławiński, 2nd edition, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1989, p. 79

³ W. Wantuch, *O poetyce cyklu lirycznego*, op.cit. p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 53.

Similar observations on the theme of the Polish poetic cycle appear in the writing of Rolf Fieguth, a Slavist of German origin. His most productive texts include *Poetry in its Critical Phase and Other Readings from Polish Literature* (*Poezja w fazie krytycznej i inne studiach z literatury polskiej*, Izabelin 2000) as well as *Scattered Branches. The Cycle and Associative Compositional Forms in the Work of Adam Mickiewicz* (*Rozpierzchłe gałązki. Cykliczne i skojarzeniowe formy kompozycyjne w twórczości Adama Mickiewicza*, Warsaw 2002). His remaining texts fell under the auspices of the project *The European Poetic Cycle: Poetry and History of the "Derivative" Genre* (*Europejski cykl poetycki: poetyka i historia gatunku „pochodnego”*), which was conceived and spearheaded by Fieguth himself. Fieguth's achievements have inspired Polish scholars to take a closer look at the cycle. This became the subject of the volume *From Kochanowski to Mickiewicz. Essays on the Polish Poetic Cycle (Od Kochanowskiego do Mickiewicza. Szkice o polskim cyklu poetyckim* Warsaw 2004), by a group of scholars working with Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska.

At about the same time, in 2000, a series of publications came out of Białystok that addressed themes of cyclicity not only in poetry, but in prose as well, and ultimately in other fields of art, such as painting and music. Under the banner of the series *Concerning the Cycle (Wokół cyklu)*, the Faculty of Philology at the University of Białystok published the following titles: *The Literary Cycle in Poland (Cykl literacki w Polsce*, 2001), *The Cycle and the Novel (Cykl i powieść*, 2004), *Semiotics of the Cycle. The Cycle in Music, Art and Literature (Semiotyka cyklu. Cykl w muzyce, plastyce i literaturze*, 2005), and finally, *Cycles and Cyclicity: Essays Dedicated to Professor Krystyna Jakowska (Cykle i cykliczność. Prace dedykowane pani profesor Krystynie Jakowskiej*, 2010). Aside from these contributions, several texts have appeared that analyze cyclicity in the oeuvres of specific authors. Among these, it is worth naming Ewa Szczepkowska's publication, *Włodzimierz Odojewski's Podil Cycle. Characters. Landscapes. Territories of Memory. (Cykl podolski Włodzimierza Odojewskiego. Postacie. Krajobrazy. Obszary pamięci*, Warsaw 2002).

The narrative cycle as a subject has been most thoroughly theorized in the scholarship of Krystyna Jakowska. In her book *On the Story Cycle. On Theory and the Narrative Cycle in Poland (O cyklu opowiadań. Z teorii i cyklu narracyjnego w Polsce*, 2011), Jakowska summarizes the current state of research on this subject and uses a broad spectrum of examples to chronicle the narrative cycle throughout the ages. Her method is both theoretical and in keeping with a broader literary history. In her text *The Story Cycle: An Attempt at a History. Intuitions and Proposals (Cykl opowiadań próba historii. Intuicje i sugestie)*, Jakowska attempts to historically map the narrative cycle as a genre. She also proposes her own typology of the cycle: the historical cycle, the portrait cycle, the autobiographical cycle, the "philosophical" or issue-based cycle, and the "intertextual" cycle.⁵ Each of the above types has its own place in the history of literature, although only a few of them have been adequately recognized in any contemporary history of the genre. As Jakowska has emphasized, however, it is quite clear that a history of the cycle deserves its own place within contemporary theory. There is a need for scholars who will scrutinize both the origins of the cycle in classical Poland, as well as those from the turn of the century, the interwar period, and in contemporary publishing. Jakowska's students have enthusiastically taken up this trajectory of research, and have closely examined specific iterations of the poetic cycle on the scale of centuries, identifying points where they meet, and where they diverge.

⁵ K. Jakowska, *Cykl opowiadań próba historii. Intuicje i sugestie*, p. 37-47, in: *Cykl literacki w Polsce*, ed. Krystyna Jakowska, Barbara Olech and Katarzyna Sokołowska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok 2001.

In addition to literary histories of the cycle, the genealogical theme is also a significant thread of research. Many scholars discuss the story cycle exclusively in terms of its composition,⁶ which results in too severe a simplification. That the narrative cycle constitutes a genre is clear: after all, it is bordered by the short story on one end, and the novel on the other. Moreover, at the junction between cycle, story and novel, an entirely new form has emerged, called the “omnibus novel”, which can be read either as a novel or as a collection of stories.⁷ Bogumiła Kaniewska, among others, has written substantially on the similarities and distinctions between the cycle and the novel:

The novel and the narrative cycle in fact have much in common: both genres grew out of a need for a somewhat comprehensive portrait of the world. Both make use of various forms of correspondence and introduce a relatively broad cast of characters. They activate a number of motifs and tend to cover a rather extensive stretch of space or time. In their classically structured forms, their plots are logically organized. The differences, however, are most pronounced on three levels: composition, reception and the inner workings of the text.⁸

As Kaniewska emphasizes, in the novel we encounter the predominance of the whole over the fragment, while the cycle, by contrast, is organized differently: in this case, the fragment dominates the whole. The cycle and the novel also differ in terms of the reading strategies they incite. The novel is linear and continuous. It develops over the course of the reader’s journey, while the cycle “envisions a certain *parallel quality* for its reception: its individual pieces are in fact read in a determined order – usually one imposed by the author – but behave autonomously and occupy the reader’s consciousness as wholes in themselves, arranged side by side”. Reading the novel in fragments, the reader becomes quite aware that the order has been somehow disrupted in advance. When reading a cycle, however, the reader feels “authorized” to read selected stories or fragments and omit the rest, given that “such an action is written into the very poetics of the cycle.”⁹ The novel is always treated as one linear and continuous text, while the cycle, even one that is impeccably organized, will always remain a collection of distinct, autonomous texts. On the other hand, in contemporary Polish prose, we see more and more instances of authors resigning from features like finality, coherence and continuity, in favor of an asymmetry of narrative, events and their sequence. This shift renders the contemporary novel closer to the story cycle, which in turn reveals the influence of the cycle on the novel’s form. Kaniewska’s examples of novels influenced by the poetic cycle include Andrzej Stasiuk’s *Nine (Dziewieć)* and Olga Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times (Prawiek i inne czasy)*. Kaniewska concludes her argument with the claim that “the relationship between the novel and the cycle cannot be summarized as the impact of one form on the other – it becomes necessary here to speak of a certain common sphere, a sphere of common possibilities that both genres employ to an even degree.”¹⁰

Defining the narrative cycle on the basis of its contrast with another genre paves the way for a coherent definition. For Jakowska, the narrative cycle is

⁶ See Jan Trzynadłowski *Kompozycja cyklu literackiego*, “Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Prace literackie IX”, issue 67, Wrocław 1967.

⁷ K. Jakowska, *O cyklu opowiadań. Z teorii i cyklu narracyjnego w Polsce*, Białystok 2011, p. 15.

⁸ B. Kaniewska, *Między cyklem a powieścią*, in: *Cykl literacki w Polsce*, Białystok 2001, p. 23-35

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

a collection of various stories in which each story forms a finished whole, and yet all of them are tied together. Due to their coherence, the entirety of the cycle relates to each of its constituent stories as an overarching whole – one that is both semantic and compositional. Each story, then, through its proximity to the cycle, modifies its own meaning – its meaning becomes new and greater than when we read it in isolation.¹¹

Jakowska's list of the most common linkages between the individual stories comprising a cycle includes: a visible compositional frame, the narrator's attitude, a problem, theme, identified hero, portrayed world, and language attributes (as well as thought structures). All works deserving the term "narrative cycle" activate these features.

Scholarship on the Polish narrative cycle often focuses on a particular author's body of work. Ewa Szczepkowska has studied the work of Włodzimierz Odojewski precisely in terms of its cyclicity and recurrent motifs. Szczepkowska has already analyzed the writer's Podil cycle in her book *Włodzimierz Odojewski's Podil Cycle. Characters. Landscapes. Territories of Memory (Cykl podolski Włodzimierza Odojewskiego. Postacie. Krajobrazy. Obszary pamięci, Warsaw 2002)*, as well as in her text *Concerning the Twilight of the World (Wokół zmierzchu świata, on the matter of the narrative cycle in Odojewski's work)* which is included in the above-mentioned volume *The Cycle and the Novel (Cykl i powieść, Białystok 2004)*. Echoing Inga Iwasiów, Szczepkowska notes that the "opposition between the fragment and the whole becomes the basis for the Podil cycle's construction, ultimately proving to be Odojewski's finest narrative technique."¹² The author's entire oeuvre reveals a tension between the fragment and the whole. While reading Odojewski's individual stories, we often must refer to the remaining stories in the volume, or even to texts located in other volumes that are called to mind by a specific person, place or feeling.

The stories of the volume *Forgotten, Not Extinguished (Zapomniane, nieuśmierzone)* are tied together by the theme of emigration. The cycle's unity is developed through the introduction of a subject – through that subject's loneliness and sense of alienation. The writer obscures the hero's individual characteristics, and in this way imbues the whole volume with universal meaning. The linking factor of the volume *Let Us Go, Let Us Go Home (Jedźmy, wracajmy)* is chronology: the cycle begins during the war and culminates in an emigrant's tale. Moreover, scattered throughout the collection are the author's signature themes and motifs: war, revenge, and the impossibility of reconciling the past. In *No Air (Bez tchu)*, meanwhile, we can discern a certain autobiographical and commemorative feature, since the author self-reflexively incorporates signals of a "unifying whole" throughout the volume. The analysis presented here allows us to note changes that structure a single author's career over a period of time.

To conclude, it is worth adding that research on the cycle in Poland has not been confined to literary material, but has extended into fields such as music and the arts. This bears witness to the far reach of these themes and to the new possibilities that continue to appear as we develop them.

¹¹K. Jakowska, *O cyklu opowiadań. Z teorii i cyklu narracyjnego w Polsce*, Białystok 2011, p. 25.

¹²I. Iwasiów, *Podążając za Katarzyną – szkic o prozie Odojewskiego*, in: *Odojewski i krytycy*, p. 202.

KEYWORDS

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PROSE CYCLE

ABSTRACT:

This article discusses the state of research on the category of the cycle in Polish literature, against the backdrop of European scholarship. At first, the theme of cyclicity particularly interested scholars in reference to lyric poetry. Here, it is worth naming the contributions of Stefania Skwarczyńska, Janusz Sławiński, Wiesława Wantuch, Jerzy Ziomek and Jan Trzynadłowski. Since 2000, driven in part by the work of the German Slavist Rolf Fieguth, we can chart a significant rise in interest in this category among Polish scholars – in lyric poetry and prose alike. The subject becomes especially important in Białystok circles, where scholars under Krystyna Jakowska's stewardship published a series of publications that meticulously analyzed these themes. Noteworthy titles among these include: *The Literary Cycle in Poland (Cykl literacki w Polsce, 2001)*, *The Cycle and the Novel (Cykl i powieść, 2004)*, *Semiotics of the Cycle. The Cycle in Music, Art and Literature (Semiotyka cyklu. Cykl w muzyce, plastyce i literaturze, 2005)*, and finally, *Cycles and Cyclicity: Essays Dedicated to Professor Krystyna Jakowska (Cykle i cykliczność. Prace dedykowane pani profesor Krystynie Jakowskiej, 2010)*.

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