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“Formalism” in Polish Literary Scholarship

In discussing the contribution of the Polish “Formal” or “Integral” School to the development of literary research, one of the difficulties is whether to view it mainly as an echo of Russian Formalism or as a scholarly movement in its own right. There is no doubt that the often strikingly suggestive theoretical slogans and undeniable practical achievements of the Russian Formalists—such as Shklovsky’s insights on the theory of the novel, V. I. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, M. A. Petrovsky’s *Morphology of the Short Story*, and the research of Boris Tomashevsky, Viktor Zhirmunsky, and Roman Jakobson in the field of poetry—all greatly attracted those Polish scholars who were looking for a coherent, strictly literary set of criteria, discouraged as they were by the inflation of biographism and psychologism in literary research. Yet the impact of Russian Formalism was limited in scope and in many respects rather indirect. On the one hand, the reaction against the one-sidedness of the psychological school came in Poland independently, and in some ways even earlier than in Russia. For this the Polish scholars did not need to go to Russia—they had both ancient (Aristotle) and more modern sources (German, Italian, French, and others). On the other hand, many of the Polish scholars did not even know the Russian language, though they knew some Western languages very well. (The scholar who was to become the foremost promoter of Formalism, Manfred Kridl, knew very little Russian when he came to teach at the University of Wilno. It was under the influence and with the help of a group of students that he became familiar with the writings of the Formalists.)

Anyway, the demand for greater emphasis on problems of form was a common phenomenon in Europe at the turn of the century. In such works as Friedrich Spielhagen’s *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans* (Leipzig, 1883), Otto Ludwig’s *Formen der Erzählung* (1891), Paul Ernst’s *Der Weg zur Form* (Berlin, 1906), and others, the preoccupation with formal aspects of literary works was coming more and more to the fore. Benedetto Croce’s aesthetic views were also formulated at the turn of the century, and the Lansonian analysis was gaining popularity.

In Poland, as in Russia, a similar shift was taking place at about the same

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Second Congress of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences, held at Columbia University in April 1971.

time, and expressions of the new direction appeared independently of each other. One can even say that Poland at that time—as often before—was a kind of intermediary between Russian and Western scholarship and literary criticism. Certain aspects of Modernism, for example, including its logocentric attitudes, “meta-language,” and so forth, were propagated in Russia with reference to or directly by some Polish writers and critics.¹ We must also remember the impact of the Prague Linguistic Circle, with its structuralist approach to language and literature as expressed in its *Theses* and postulated on the occasion of the First International Congress of Slavists, held in Prague in 1929, and in a number of essays on special topics devoted mainly to the same problem which absorbed both the Russian Formalists and Roman Ingarden: the basic distinction between the language in its social function and in art.

As for more specifically Polish contributions, I think one name in particular has to be mentioned first—Kazimierz Wóycicki. Two of his studies published early in this century, *Historia literatury i poetyka* (*Literary History and Poetics*, Warsaw, 1914) and “Jedność stylowa utworu poetyckiego” (“On the Stylistic Unity of Poetic Work”),² stressed the need for specific aesthetic criteria as outlined, for example, by B. Krystal in his book *Wie ist die Kunstgeschichte als Wissenschaft möglich* (Halle, 1910). Wóycicki thus professed aesthetic formalism. He pointed out—and this also became one of the basic postulates of the Formalists—that separate linguistic elements have their distinct value in a specific literary environment as organic parts of the whole, and cannot be viewed in isolation. As in a chemical reaction, any change in one part affects other parts, and thus the whole work. Wóycicki influenced a number of younger scholars.

But the state of literary theory in Poland remained heterogeneous. The majority of the Polish scholars still followed the biographic-psychological school. That is why Manfred Kridl’s *Wstęp do badań nad dziełem literackim* (*Introduction to the Study of Works of Literature*), published in 1936 as volume 1 of the series “Z zagadnień poetyki” (“Problems in Poetics”), was important in promoting the discussion by stressing the need for a new approach and strongly endorsing the principles of Russian Formalism (perhaps somewhat too strongly, as it seemed to some of his well-wishing but more traditionally inclined friends). Kridl did not actually contribute any new views, but he stirred up vigorous debate. He said of his book that it was not an attempt to “discover America,” for America had been discovered a long time ago. “Our work” he said,

1. See, for example, P. S. Kogan, “Literaturnyia napravleniia i kritika 80-kh i 90-kh gg.,” in D. N. Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky, ed., *Istoriia russkoi literatury XIX v.*, 5 vols. (Moscow, 1908–11), 5:61–100.

2. Published in *Sprawozdania z posiedzeń Towarzystwa Naukowego Warszawskiego, Wydział językoznawstwa i literatury*, 7, no. 2 (1914): 5–36.

“will be and must be based on all the valuable achievements, foreign as well as Polish, and only on this foundation will it try, in certain areas, to move forward” (pp. 10-11). Kridl, of course, acknowledged that another Polish scholar, Roman Ingarden, had discussed much the same problems a few years earlier in his book *Das literarische Kunstwerk* (Halle, 1931). But both the adaptation of certain Formalist principles and a certain “vulgarization” of Ingarden’s phenomenological subtleties, to use Waclaw Borowy’s label for Kridl’s book, were necessary, because these theories were little known. Also, Ingarden’s postulates in his first version were very abstract and, as Kridl rightly pointed out, not altogether clear in their applicability to literary analysis.

Edmund Husserl’s ideas as expressed in his lectures which Ingarden attended as a student and in his work *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (Halle, 1913) and Werner Ziegenfuss’s *Die phänomenologische Ästhetik* (Berlin, 1928) formed the basis of Ingarden’s views on the nature of literary works and the method of investigating them. He applied the philosophical-aesthetic concepts to literature and created a set of coherent and indeed strictly formal definitions—quite independent of the Russian Formalists, but basically in agreement with their main philosophy. Ingarden’s “key” formulae postulate the same intrinsic quality of literature as the Formalists’ criteria. Although less logocentric, since he does not accept the notion of the self-contained word, Ingarden’s theory nevertheless recognizes the specific quality of such linguistic categories as the *sentence* in a work of literature, stressing that its distinctive artistic function is different from the communicative function of the assertive sentence in social usage. Thus a sentence in a work of art is only partly an asserting unit, though it may have all its features. It is also detached from the social context, and remains within the realm of fiction. Plato’s *Symposium*, for example, can be read either as a series of statements (judgments) about the world or as a work of fiction.

In the course of the discussions on methodology that took place in Poland during the thirties, Ingarden had the occasion to sharpen and elucidate some of his theses, especially in his essay *O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego* (*On the Investigation of Works of Literature*) published in Lwów in 1937. In this work he clarified his concept of the simultaneity and organic interrelations between the various “strata” of a work of art, in which all the structural elements are simultaneously perceived on a number of levels—euphonic, semantic/conceptual, and so forth.

During the few years before the war, 1936–39, a considerable number of studies of both a general methodological and a detailed analytical character appeared, some of them of lasting value. The discussion of these and other problems became very animated, and many personal and professional duels were fought over them. Waclaw Borowy, Roman Ingarden, Stanisław Adam-

czewski, Stefan Kołaczkowski, and Julian Krzyżanowski—and, abroad, Karel Krejčí, Frank Wollman, and many others—expressed their views on the issue. The attacks against Formalism came partly from those with traditional convictions who identified interest in literary works with interest in their authors, partly from the adherents of the more modern German Idealistic School, and partly from supporters of Marxist positions, which only a few critics knew anything about.

An interesting participant in the discussion was Wacław Lednicki, who in his review of some writings by Russian adepts of Formalism, “Precz z biografią” (“Down with Biography”),³ quite dispassionately reminded his contemporaries of Tolstoy’s remarks on art in a letter to Pypin (in reference to Turgenev’s work). Lednicki felt that these remarks were very timely, since they had to do with both formal and ideological aspects. The questions Tolstoy asked of an artist were the following ones: (1) Who and what kind of person is it who is speaking? (2) How does he say it? (3) Is he saying what he really feels and thinks?

Although it would be difficult to speak of pure formalism and its achievements in Poland, the movement certainly made a significant contribution to the development of literary studies and left an imprint on numerous books and articles by scholars who entered the field of literary research in the late twenties and early thirties. But, as we have seen, older scholars such as Wóycicki and Kridl also were active in this movement.

One of the earliest studies in which formalist methods of literary analysis were applied—and actually the only one in which they were applied in their pure form—is Jerzy Putrament’s *Struktura nowel Prusa* (*The Structure of Prus’s Short Stories*, Wilno, 1936) published as the first volume, although it was numbered as volume 2, of Kridl’s “Problems of Poetics” series. (Kridl’s own methodological study scheduled as volume 1 was not ready at that time.) Since it was based on a thorough study of the main works of Russian Formalism and concerned a major Polish writer, Putrament’s work might have been expected to exert some influence even though it was printed in an edition of only three hundred copies and hardly given any publicity. But it remained practically unnoticed. More important perhaps was the influence that Putrament and a number of other advanced students at the University of Wilno, including the undersigned, had exercised on Kridl in the course of his seminars in literature. Kridl acknowledged his debt in the introduction to his book (p. 11). He in turn carried the discussions to the wider academic audience and succeeded in securing continuity for the Wilno series for at least a few years. Ironically, the badly needed financial support for publication of the series was terminated by the Polish government, partly because the series was allegedly

3. Wacław Lednicki, *Przyjaciele Moskale* (Cracow, 1935), pp. 99–108.

spreading “alien ideas” from the Soviet Union, and partly because the work of some Jewish scholars was scheduled to be published in a collective volume. In this strange way Formalism had the misfortune to be under attack by Communists and anti-Communists at the same time.

Kridl’s programmatic *Wstęp do badań nad dziełem literackim* was actually not much more than an attempt to state the need for a more closely and coherently defined *area* and *method* of literary scholarship. Influenced by Wóycicki and Ingarden on the one hand and by Russian Formalism on the other, Kridl stressed in this volume the common denominator of these approaches—the need for a specific, strictly literary method of investigating literary creations. Like the Formalists, Kridl saw the work of literature as an original creation that “serves its own literary imaginative purposes, of scant relevance to processes in real life.” It creates its own “reality of another dimension,” Kridl said, agreeing with Ingarden’s formula that literature offers an “appearance of reality,” not reality itself. This applies to events, motifs, space, time, and so forth.

In his critical application of the Formalist principles Kridl tried to avoid the pitfalls of doctrinairism, which incidentally the Formalists themselves were not unaware of. Accepting the premise that the meaning of a literary work lies not in the “theme” or in the “form” but rather in the specific synthesis of the two, Kridl tried to re-establish the proper proportions here, pointing out that various historical, psychological, and ideological elements must be taken into account in a literary analysis if they are artistically pertinent elements of “content” inseparable from “forms.”

Thus Kridl’s method rests on two theoretical assumptions: the domain of literary investigation lies in the work itself, and this work is a distinct unit made up of a complexity of constituent elements. These elements can only be examined in relation to the whole (therefore there is no such thing as the duality of content and form). Kridl hesitated at first to choose any adjective to describe his “method,” and spoke of “Polish Aestheticism,” “Polish Formalism,” or “Integrally Literary Method” (after Tadeusz Czeżowski), realizing that there was not much justification for claiming a sovereign status for this Polish brand of literary scholarship. Only later did he finally settle on the term “Integral Method” and proclaimed his approach as “Theses for Discussion” in an article written in English for *Comparative Literature*.⁴

From the standpoint of the development of literary scholarship in Poland, probably the most important—in that they tackled a number of concrete literary problems of general and practical interest—were the subsequent volumes in Kridl’s “Problems of Poetics” series devoted to questions of Polish prosody.

4. Manfred Kridl, “The Integral Method of Literary Scholarship: Theses for Discussion,” *Comparative Literature*, 3, no. 1 (1951): 18–31.

Karol Zawodziński's monograph *Zarys wersyfikacji polskiej* (*Outline of Polish Versification*, Wilno, 1936) is probably the first Polish study in this field to take into account the views and scholarly idiom of Russian Formalism.⁵ Even though it is little more than a sketchy survey, the book presents a number of interesting and valid observations.

Much more ambitious and scholarly is a two-volume work by Franciszek Siedlecki, *Studia z metryki polskiej* (*Studies in Polish Metrics*), published in Wilno in 1937. Although this work is more closely connected with Czech Structuralism, it should be recalled that the views of the exponents of the Prague School, especially in the person of Roman Jakobson and especially in the field of prosody, are to a large degree an extension of the Moscow and Leningrad Formalism. Much more than Zawodziński, Siedlecki was a pioneer in this field in Poland. Taking his cue from structural linguistics as applied to poetry, especially in Jakobson's, Mukařovský's, and Trubetskoj's studies of Czech poetry, Siedlecki attempted to define and systematize a number of features typical of Polish prosody. He devoted special attention to the regularities and irregularities of Polish meter, in which certain grammatical properties such as the nonphonemic character of stress account for certain prosodic phenomena. The entire second volume, for example, is on the theory of transaccentuation. Some of Siedlecki's claims have not stood up under subsequent investigations, but they were certainly a step forward.

Although Wóycicki's *Rytm w liczbach* (*Rhythm in Numbers*, Wilno, 1938), based on a statistical approach (the relation between the length of words and various kinds of rhythm), did not seem very productive at the time, Wóycicki anticipated certain procedures which later were successfully applied elsewhere.

"Problems of Poetics" was referred to as the "Wilno Series," but only two volumes were by authors active in Wilno (Kridl and Putrament). The others were from Warsaw. The most active and dynamic among them was Siedlecki, who was one of the organizers of a group of students and junior members at Warsaw University. Even before the Wilno movement he initiated a series ("Archives") of translations of German, Russian, and Czech studies promoting Formalist and Structuralist views. The "Archives" published Zhirmunsky's *Introduction to Poetics* (*Wstęp do poetyki*, Warsaw, 1934) and a collection of essays of such important scholars as Leo Spitzer, Karl Vossler, Viktor Vinogradov, and others, called *Z zagadnień stylistyki* (*Problems of Stylistics*, Warsaw, 1937). The group also edited a Festschrift—and, what is more, financed publication of a small but technically defective edition—in honor

5. As a journalist and as a literary critic Zawodziński was much less rigorous—especially avoiding the too-narrow scope of his formal analysis of poetry, which was limited to the investigation of problems of sound and rhythm and excluded the thematic aspects.

of Wóycicki (nominally labeled as volume 7 of the Wilno series) entitled *Prace ofiarowane Kazimierzowi Wóycickiemu* (*Essays Dedicated to Kazimierz Wóycicki*, Wilno, 1937). The significance of this volume is that it was the first to bring together not translations but original contributions by such prominent scholars of different persuasion as Roman Jakobson, Jerzy Kuryłowicz, Nikolai Trubetskoy, Josef Hrabák, Waclaw Borowy, and Zygmunt Łempicki, on the one hand, and the young adepts (almost exclusively from Warsaw) Franciszek Siedlecki, Stefan Żółkiewski, Kazimierz Budzyk, et al., on the other. Unfortunately the book remained almost unknown. Another volume—nearly completed—of the most representative writings of Russian Formalists was destroyed during the war in September 1939.

In the postwar period in Poland all such schools as Formalism and Structuralism were pronounced methodologically erroneous for being too abstract, too detached from social reality, and based on the “fetishistic” notion of art as a thing in itself rather than an expression of human conditions. However, certain not entirely unsuccessful attempts at salvaging some of the principles of Formalist scholarship (trying to present it as part of a wider critical platform based on Marxist philosophy) were made, especially by such scholars (formerly associated with Kridl and Siedlecki) as Żółkiewski, M. R. Mayenowa, and a few others. A characteristic example of these difficulties is a book by Mayenowa, *Poetyka opisowa* (*Descriptive Poetics*, Warsaw, 1949), in which the author, while following closely the principles of the Formalist B. V. Tomashevsky and the Prague Structuralist Jan Mukařovský, finds it necessary to deny the anticipated criticism that her work is “the result of accepting the theoretical tenets of the Formal Method.” She says that “for a full cognition of a work of literature it is necessary to analyze that period’s social forces which are reflected in literature” (p. 3).

However, the impact of the principles and undeniable discoveries of Formalism can be observed. Although the postwar policy was to reject Formalism as ideologically wrong, a number of works published both by the former students from Wilno and Warsaw and by other scholars display attitudes, if not directly affiliated, at least partly associated with Formalism. A few of these works had been initiated during the “Sturm und Drang” period of Formalism, though they came to fruition first after the war. The following books are good examples of those that adopted certain aspects of Formalism but widened the scope of research to include some of the other modern approaches. Maria Rzeuska’s “Chłopi” *Reymonta* (*Reymon’s “Peasants,”* Warsaw, 1950) is a study that was born under Kridl’s wings but developed independently. A book by the author of this paper, *La fonction des éléments dialectaux dans les œuvres littéraires* (Uppsala, 1949), takes into account the main principles of structural linguistically oriented stylistics, though it partly

adheres to Marouzeau's concept of style. Irena Sławińska's *Tragedia w epoce Młodej Polski* (*Tragedy During the Young Poland Period*, Toruń, 1948) combines Formalist theories with British and American scholarship in the field of drama. Also, a few more recent studies could be mentioned in which the Formalist methods are successfully applied.⁶

One more volume in the "Problems of Poetics" series appeared immediately after the war (though not numbered, it clearly constituted the continuation of the Wilno series). Entitled *Stylistyka teoretyczna w Polsce* (*Theoretical Stylistics in Poland*, Warsaw, 1946), the book was edited by Kazimierz Budzyk, one of the original collaborators in the Wilno-Warsaw enterprise. Although most of the materials in the volume were reprints of periodical articles, a couple of new essays were included and Budzyk supplied a historical survey. For a few more years there were expectations that the series would be continued. But in reality this was not to be. The planned volume in commemoration of Siedlecki (who died in 1942) has never materialized, and Formalism was not able to make an officially accepted comeback.⁷

Kridl himself carried his convictions with him to America, where he tried to make them known in the *Comparative Literature* essay, in some other articles and reviews, and, of course, in his lectures at Columbia University. However, both Formalism and Structuralism came into vogue in America independently of Kridl's mediation, because such prominent representatives of these theories as Roman Jakobson and René Wellek also came to America and played an important part in the development of literary scholarship on this continent.⁸

6. In this category, for example, are some of the volumes in the series "Z dziejów form artystycznych w literaturze polskiej" published by the Institute of Literary Research under the editorship of Maria Renata Mayenowa. She also edited the impressive multi-volume *Poetyka*, devoted to the main problems of Polish poetry. Strong affinities to Formalism and Structuralism can be seen in the symposium *Poetyka i matematyka* (*Poetry and Mathematics*), published on the occasion of the Sixth International Congress of Slavists (Warsaw, 1968).

7. This is clearly in line with the situation in the USSR. It is interesting to note that Structuralism fared a little better in Poland, for an anthology of Structuralist writings, *Praska szkoła strukturalna, 1926-1948*, was published in 1966 (ed. M. R. Mayenowa). Of course, officially no formal or structural method is permitted. There are constant reminders to that effect in both Poland and the USSR. In a recent, somewhat "popular" excursus in *Novyi mir* (1970, no. 12) with the telling title "Kamo griadeshi?" ("Quo Vadis?"), the author, Dr. Iu. Barabash, in speaking of French Structuralism, once more reaffirms the official "anti-idealistic" position: "Outwardly structuralism is very matter-of-fact [*delovit*], pragmatic; any mysticism, any idealistic crust [*shelukha*] seems alien to it. But on a closer look it is not difficult to detect the clear marks of idealism. Fetishism of structure, devoid of any objective material foundation, the interpretation of reality as only the sum total of 'pure relations'—all this leads us far away from objectivity" (p. 224).

8. However, it is only now, thirty years later, and long after Victor Erlich's pioneering study (*Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine*, The Hague, 1955), that these writings are gradually appearing in America (in the Michigan, Brown, Nebraska, and other series)—thus witnessing to the vitality of these ideas. Similarly, in France the wave of French

Thus Kridl's role remained somewhat limited. But it will be remembered that he initiated the discussion and by his sober scholarly temperament, erudition, cool head, and sense of balance lent the young enthusiasts badly needed guidance and prevented them from excesses. This sketchy survey shows, I hope, that the seeds of Formalism in Poland did not fall on sterile ground.

"New Criticism" in the sixties has not been without some connection with Formalism. See, for example, the anthology edited by Tzvetan Todorov, *Théorie de la littérature* (Paris, 1966). Indeed, the adherents of the "Lansonian" school claimed that the entire *Nouvelle critique* was mainly the extension of Russian Formalism. "S'il y a une 'imposture' de la 'nouvelle critique' française," says R. Fayolle in his review of Raymond Picard's *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture*, "elle est peut-être là, dans cette prétention (naïve?) de proposer comme nouvelles des idées dont un bon nombre ont été depuis longtemps formulées par des critiques russes ou anglo-saxons" (*Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 67, no. 1 [1967]: 175).