

Litany and poetry. On the material of Polish literature from the 11th to the 21st century

Summary

Many works about litany forms of the prayer appeared since the end of the 19th century. They all recognize two aspects of the litany: religious, as a liturgical prayer, and literary, as a poetic phenomenon. However, no theoretical study about poetics of litany was hitherto undertaken. The content of this book describes the litany according to the theories of literary genre (Chapter 1), narrative (Chapter 2), communication (Chapter 3) and verse (Chapter 4), as well as the history of Polish poetically oriented litany from the 11th to the 21st century (Chapters 5-11).

Poetics of litany

In order to distinguish between the litany as inherent to the Christian culture, and the litany forms of prayer functioning outside the Christian tradition, we introduced, in Chapter 1, the term *gene*, which we adopted from biological sciences. For the purpose of our study, we define the *gene* as a set of rules, which can be transferred either from one genre to the other, or from a sub-*gene* to another sub-*gene*, or from a previous to a subsequent variant of the same genre. The litany is thought to comprise three genes, an ektenial, a polionymic and a chairetismic one. They all express different patterns and semantic fields of the litany, in conformity with their historical roots. The roots of each gene are described taking examples from a specific tradition: for the ektenial gene from the ancient Judaic tradition (such as the *pijjût* genre); for the polionymic gene from the ancient Egyptian tradition (such as *Litany of Sun*); for the chairetismic gene from the Greek pre- and early-Byzantine tradition (such as *The Akathist Hymn*).

We describe the origins of the litany genre in conformity with the theories proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and György Lukács. The authors regard the literary genre as reflecting the image of the world, accepted by the particular

culture. In the first millennium of Christianity, the new Christian image of the world prompted a unification of the formerly distinct sets of text rules, and the so formed assembly enabled to express the novelty of the Christian image of the world as well. Hence the three-gene litany is a coherent, specifically Christian genre, although it contains somehow contradictory sets of rules, which also exist, but in isolated forms, in other cultures. The generic image of the world is usually not mentioned in the given prayer verbally, but it often supplements the text with a hidden narrative.

Chapter 2 of Part One describes the phenomenon of narration in the litany, where the specific events are presented as units of the divine plan in the superior and impenetrable order, accepted by the compiler of the prayer. The phrases describing the events do not link together in a consecutive chain, but are interrupted by the repeated formulae of the prayer, on which they depend syntactically. As a result, the text of the litany does not report the holy story from anyone's point of view. Each event undergoes the substantiation, it acquires a value, and its description can be used as an epithet or an antonomasia of the name of God, Virgin Mary, the angel or the saint. The story should be independent of the time, and the experience of the holy event is to be accessible to the faithful. Sometimes the story needs not to be explicated, because the text of the litany is already embedded in the 'hermeneutic field' (the term by S. Balbus) of the litany genre. The technique of the narration in litany has been taken over by the lay poetry. The example of the Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's epilogue to the poem *One more journey* (*Jeszcze jedna podróż*) published in 1963 is presented at the end of the Chapter.

Chapter 3 of Part One contains the analysis of the Wojciech Bąk's poem 'The Prayer to Mary the Mother' (*Modlitwa do Marii Matki*) representing the main communicative structure of the genre of litany. As a litany, the poem has not a single formal subject, but belongs to a triple addressor instance (the subjects of tradition, community, and the single faithful), and is directed to a quintuple addressee instance (the faithful, the divine intercessor, God as the Supreme Witness, God as the indirect addressee, God as the direct addressee). The triple addressor instance imposes many limitations on the author. The Chapter 3 describes the three author's liberty axes: within the linear structure limitations (the syntactic axis), within the formula paradigm limitations (the paradigmatic axis) and the axis of the formula translation (the exegetic axis). While the church litanies tend to standardize the translation of the formulae, the poetry attaches more importance to the exegetic axis, enriching the prayer language and enabling a dialogue among different ways, how the given formula might be understood.

The last chapter of Part One distinguishes between two meanings of the term 'litany verse' (*wiersz litanijny*). The first meaning: 'litany in verse' (*litanian wierszem*) refers to the litanies written in one of the classical metrical

systems of the Polish verse: strictly or non-strictly regular syllabic verse (regularny lub nieregularny sylabizm), syllabic-accentual verse (sylabotonizm) or tonic verse (tonizm). The second meaning: ‘syntagmic-accentual verse’ (wiersz syntagmotoniczny) refers to the metrical pattern independent of the classical systems. In a syntagmic-accentual verse each line is fractionated according to a fixed number of parts of the sentence, some of which can be internally split up (albeit not necessarily) into a strictly indicated number of accentual groups. The syntagmic-accentual verse is the most common metrical form in the church litanies, where its repetitive structure also depends on musical background. The prayers designed for private worship or widespread as poetic forms lack this background, hence their metrical form often becomes unclear. In this case they appeal to the memory of the reader, supposed to be familiar with the proper recitative style.

History of the Polish poetic litanies

In Part Two of the book we describe the evolution of the litany form in the Polish poetry, in line with the concepts discussed in Part One.

The 11th-century *Codex of Gertruda*, the daughter of Mieszko II the King of Poland, contains the first Polish prayers written in the form of litany. Chapter 5 analyses two of them: ‘Ut me miseram famulam Tuam Gertrudam custodire digneris...’ and ‘Ave Maria gratia plena dominus tecum...’. The stylistic features of the first litany indicate that the text was intended to be accepted by the duchess as her individual prayer reflecting her point of view, and perhaps containing quotations from her own utterances. Therefore, Gertruda may be regarded as the very author of the text, although somebody else probably fulfilled the act of writing. The second litany is a prayer similar to the text from the 12th-century Paris manuscript, edited by G.G. Meersseman. It might be the basis for the later Western copy, or both records originated (directly or indirectly) from the same source. Some sentences from both versions repeat in the 15th-century Polish prayer ‘Zdrowa bądź Maryja, miłości pełna...’ from *Nawojka’s Prayer Book*.

In the Middle Ages litany was also one of the main genres of Polish poetry. Thereafter, its influence spread onto other genres of Polish literature. Chapter 5 presents a Middle Age example of such a ‘generic productivity’ in the genre of tropes for *Kyrie*. The next chapters add more than dozen genres from the following periods. Some of these genres (as little hours, rosary, tropes for *Kyrie* mentioned above) arose directly from the litany, whereas other genres (as garden, elogium, poetic prose, credo) increased their formal and semantic variety, and still others (as akathist, lament) allowed the same litany to maintain (or recover) its own original but forgotten forms of expression. On the turn of the 19th century the litany was also used as means of nearing poetry with music, as well as of naturalizing the oriental genres of poetry (as

ghazal) or of enlivening the old ones (as alba, serenade). This many hundred years old generic productivity let us to say that litany played a key role in the process of shaping the genre system of Polish poetry.

There were two reasons why the poetic aspect of litany separated from its prayer nature. The first reason was the appearance of the fictional addressees at variance with the Church canon: i.e. ancient deities in the 17th century poetry. The second step in the development of the poetic litany variant was made by the authors of the litanies praying for public benefits. This type of litany had existed from the ancient times and had been used in the official worship, including the services of the Catholic Church. However, in the 18th century the Church lost much of the former influence on political affairs. During the period of the partitions of Poland the topic of national independence was moved to literary works. Since Adam Mickiewicz's 'The Pilgrims Litany' (*Litania pielgrzyska*), therefore, the Polish litany devoted to public affairs was regarded as a poetic text only. Romanticism created two types of such litany: in the form of syntagmic-accentual verse, for which the model poem was 'The Pilgrims Litany', and the strophic litany, for which the model poems were syllabic and syllabic-accentual verses by Kornel Ujejski and others.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the two branches of the litany, one to the fiction addressees and the other to public affairs, joined together. As the examples cited in the Chapter 9 show, Poland began to be treated by the poets as one of such personalized addressees. The refrain 'O, Poland!' (*O Polsko!*) very often appeared in the literature of World War I. During World War II the list of values treated as if they were deities increased still more, containing such 'holy' addressees as Warsaw, regions of Poland, Polish soil, Polish nature, typical elements of Polish landscape (i.e. a birch) etc. In the same time the first attempts were made to treat the words of the prayer not only as the means of expression but also as intercessors in the worship. All these changes resulted in enormous popularity of the litany form among Polish poets after the war. Litany become one of the basic verse structures. From the one side it actually covered all the thematic fields of Polish modern literature, what one can recognize as a result of secularization. From the other side the Christian image of the world guaranteed the coherence of litany and its force of expression.

As Jan Twardowski's poetry shows, in the litany the generic image of the world allows to place practically all aspects of the human life in the light of Christian sacrum. Twardowski, as Wierzyński, Wojacek, Podsiadło and other 20th century poets, concentrate on the practice of counting up the world. The genre of litany causes that the register of beings selected seemingly by chance absorbs the sacral senses thanks to the Christian image of the world the genre relates to.

The force of the hidden semantics of the litany genre results from the cultural importance of the May devotions to the Blessed Virgin (as well as the

June devotions to the Sacred Heart) in the Polish Church, and from the high level of the litany prayers written by the prominent poets and by some clergymen. During the Old Polish period a broad group of various artistically successful examples of the litany prayer was composed by the widely educated Jesuits. Although these litanies were published inside the prayer-books, one can find among them courageous poetic experiments of brave metaphor, of many-phrasal supplication, of deeply idiomatic language of conversation with God, which are discussed in the Chapter 6 on examples taken from the prayer-books composed by Piotr Skarga and Kasper Drużbicki.

In the centuries following the old-Polish period the place for artistically successful litanies moved from the prayer-book to the poetry volume. Litany might be treated as a form of ingenious praise of God, Mary or the saint (i.e. Jerzy Liebert's *Litany to Our Lady*), as a form of longer meditation (i.e. Cyprian Norwid's *To Our Lady. Litany*) or even as a form of several religious poems in the cycle (i.e. cycle by Konstancja Benisławska and Jarosław Klejnocki). In the 20th century the litany as a kind of prayer was often employed by Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna. Anna Kamieńska used litany in her poetry more than fifty times. In the light of her aesthetic theory litany was not a kind of talkativeness but paradoxically, a method to learn humility of words, and in consequence to achieve silence in the prayer.