

Given Segmentation and Narrative Coherence in Lyric Cycles

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Temporary and associative connections (“temporale und sinnhafte Verknüpfungen”, Kindt/Koppe 2022) between narrative events are not always immediately apparent. Rather, such connections are revealed or constituted in the process of interpretation. This open-ended nature of texts is especially evident with regard to the “plot of poetry” (“Geschichten in Gedichten”), where “events oftentimes are presented in a compact or compressed form. Their understanding is based on the narrative competence rooted in the empirical knowledge of readers” (Hühn 2018). An exceptional form, if not the exposition, of the “plot of prose” can be found in the poetic cycle as a “complex form,” which took shape in German literature from 1800 onwards. The compilation of poems into the cycle does not merely expand the “plot of poetry” across a whole set of poems. It is in the cycle that the individual poem develops its complete narrative force. Its holistic narrative form emerges only once “individual parts come into relation with one another.” Moreover, “this holistic nature always remains virtual, an 'invisible' entity, the coherences of which always need to be (re-)constructed in the process of reception.” (Dehrmann/Schwarz/Woll 2025). Whereas narrative blanks (Leerstelle, Iser) figure in the novel most commonly intentionally as calculated and isolated incidents of a text that is intended to be received as narrative (vgl. Schmid 2023), these same blanks are a principal element of the poetic cycle. Whether a cycle functions as such, is decided only in the very process of reception. Its narrative nature relies on the realization of chronological and associative connections between its component parts by the recipient.

This paper focuses on the concept of the blank in narrative poetic cycles and interrogates the significance of such gaps in between their constitutive elements for the formation of plots on the one hand and stories on the other. Based on select cycles (Gertrud Kolmar, Marion Poschmann, Jan Wagner) I will analyze the function of narrative gaps. Aside from the creation of suspense and changes in scenery (time, place, character, and perspective), I reveal the significance of gaps as foundational elements of narrative strands. This analysis is based on the assumption that the gap relies first and foremost on the recipients. Based on their understanding of moments of narrative coherence as well as their empirical knowledge and imagination, they construct associative connections. To conclude, this paper touches upon questions about the role of coherence in poetic cycles, specifically with regard to the significance of moments of coherence for processes of coherence formation (Kohärenzbildung).