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Liminal Spaces and States in Jerzy Peterkiewicz's *Inner Circle*

1. Introduction

London has for centuries been of great interest to various people, including immigrants, tourists visiting the city for a few days, and of particular interest to writers. They came to the capital, not only from the British Isles or from the former British colonies, but also from some distant parts of the globe, such as China, the USA, or from within Europe, Poland for instance. All these men of letters used the city as a vibrant setting for their novels. Although Polish writers are not widely represented here, they have managed to reveal their presence.

Jerzy Peterkiewicz (originally Pietrkiewicz) was born in 1916, in the Polish village of Fabianki. Only later (1940) did he arrive in England as a wartime refugee. Between 1941 and 1942 he studied at the University of St Andrews, graduating with an M.A. degree. He continued his education at King's College in London up to Ph.D. level. Both his education and literary career commenced in his native language. As Bronisława Bałutowa, the author of a book on the English novel of the twentieth century notes: "unlike his renowned predecessor, Joseph Conrad, Jerzy Peterkiewicz did not fully assimilate into English tradition, he is rather a European who remained deeply rooted in Polishness."¹ Some critics claim that this makes his novels even

more absorbing and original. When we take a closer look at Peterkiewicz's works, we may notice that their characteristic feature consists in transgressing the boundaries between genres. *Isolation* (1959) made his name as a novelist. Patricia Merivale describes it as "probably his best book."² *Inner Circle* was published a few years later, i.e. in 1966. In December it was announced by *The Guardian* as the book of the month and later, one of the books of the year for 1966. *Isolation* is a novel written in five acts and for this reason it is closer to a theatrical play in its form. *Inner Circle*, on the other hand, is far closer to poetry. Following Bielatowicz, a literary critic and a poet, we can say about Peterkiewicz that: "in his English prose he remained the Polish poet. He enriched English prose with Polish poetics."³ *Inner Circle* is densely metaphorical. The poetic form of the novel is reminiscent of the Polish writer, Brunon Schulz, a man immensely gifted, both artistically and literally. In his *Sklepy Cynamonowe* (*Cinnamon Shops*), similarly to *Inner Circle*, the setting, of a small Galician town before the First World War, is of secondary importance. Thanks to the ability of wreathing the simplest things with the web of metaphor, Schulz makes the father's employees, the servant Adela and the father, himself, rather mythological figures who, inhabiting simultaneously two worlds, easily crossing the liminal boundaries between what is tangibly human, and what is unreal. Even when a particular district of the town undergoes the narrator's detailed scrutiny in *Sklepy Cynamonowe*, the emphasis is undoubtedly given to the illusionary character of the place, whose atmosphere bears resemblance to Peterkiewicz's London. In his novel, Peterkiewicz presents an untypical image of the city, a bit blurred and not that easy to follow. This vision of London (and in a broader sense – of the world) was greatly influenced by the author's war-time experiences. Following T. S. Eliot, London can be easily called "the unreal city."⁴ Only one (and this article focuses on this part), out

features of “double consciousness,”⁸ the term coined by the early twentieth-century theorist W. E. B. Du Bois. Philip Sutton realizes that this concept is of indisputable significance for liminal studies.

Whether torn between two systems or sedately straddling them, liminal zones are seen from this perspective as sites whose inhabitants are prey to the impossible desire of resolving their dualities. At the same time, however, ‘their awareness of that duality is what actually lead them [...] to interrogate normative conceptions of reality and the e

such a way as if he is not there at all; not to bother his father or disturb his daily activities. While reading the novel, one notices that Patrick is offered shelter in various places, usually at the houses of numerous ‘aunts’: “Whoever put him to bed and got him out of it for breakfast performed an aunt’s functions.”¹³

Responsibility for Patrick’s upbringing was also continually and shamelessly changing, and, as a result, he did not receive the tender care he undoubtedly and rightfully deserved. He was taken away by three adult and reputedly mature figures, namely, his two “mummies rocking a little cradle of guilt”¹⁴ and the father “who disliked being woken up before half past one in the afternoon.”¹⁵ However: “His two mothers were far too busy to look after him in an ordinary way.”¹⁶ They only catered for his very basic, physical needs. Unfortunately, none of them took trouble to move beyond the borderline of his pure physicality to take care of his emotional needs. Vera, his Bulgarian, biological mother, reduced her contacts with the son only to occasional greeting cards and late birthday presents. In effect, he is left motherless. Patrick belongs, as Turner defines it in *Liminality and Communitas*, “neither here nor

certain degree, two parallel universes – of reality and his illness – means that we should take this description as ironic. Delving into the matter, one notices that such provokingly open demeanour, oddity and departure from the conventional, socially sanctioned norms dooms him to be forced into exile at the threshold of community. His parents showed no ability to provide “their son” with any kind of secure place in the world and so deprived him, or at least, reduced significantly his chances, of later “ordinarily” functioning in society, of the future possibility of setting up his own family, for instance. In this way, his liminal position prevents him from being incorporated into society and seemingly reduces him to the disempowered condition of a child in society. Patrick, realizing his liminal position and, at least partly, that he is an outsider and subject of people’s mockery, adopts the age-old rebellious behaviour of the naughty schoolboy and resorts to lies:

‘Your new job all right?’ ... ‘Ah – the job! I’ve been asked to take up a post in Coimbra. Teaching English, you know.’ ‘Splendid, Patrick – marvellous!’ The drunk chum sounded enthusiastic. Patrick loved it when people were enthusiastic while talking to him. Then he heard: ‘How’s your Portuguese? Excellent, no doubt.’ ... ‘As a matter of fact ... I’m taking G. C. E. exams in June. Seven subjects at the Ordinary Level, three at the Advanced.’¹⁹

Unfortunately the truth is the reverse, he neither sat any exams, nor obtained any document to certify he could read or write. “His education had been entirely private and consisted of hours and hours spent in the consulting rooms of psycho-analysts.”²⁰

3. The London Tube as a Liminal Zone

The tube, London’s underground transport system, can be easily classified as a liminal space; bearing resemblance in its “betwixt-and-between” character to hotels, crossroads or airports.¹⁰ This is, to a certain extent, the place which commuters pass through in crowds, but do not live in. “Betweenness” defines this space. Therefore, the

redemptive qualities of the tube. Only during his rides, is Patrick able to become an irreproachable human, an individual whom nobody unfairly assesses or imposes limitations upon. His mental disability becomes invisible and he is able, whether consciously or not, to savour the moments spent in the tube. It is only there that he stands a good chance of encountering people (whether they are flesh and blood persons or just figments of his vivid imagination) of his own choice and predilection. Finally, it is through the tube that he transgresses the boundaries of his childhood and is able to become an adult.

Notes

1. Bronisława Bałutowa, *Powieść angielska XX wieku* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2004), 233.
2. P. Merivale, "Jerzy Peterkiewicz", in D. L. Kirkpatrick ed., *Contemporary Novelists* (London: St. James Press, New York: St. Martin Press, 1976), 1078.
3. Jerzy Starnawski ed., *Polish Literature from the European Perspective. Studies and Treaties* (Łódź, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2006), 10.
4. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harvest Books, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1934), 31.
5. Jerzy Peterkiewicz, *Inner Circle* (London: Hunt Barnard & Co. Ltd., 1968), 101.
6. Victor Turner, *Liminality and Communitas* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 95.
7. Valerie Henitiuk, *Embodied Boundaries: Images of Liminality in a Selection of Woman-Authored Courtship Narratives* (Madrid: The Gateway Press, 2007), 101.
8. Patricia Waugh ed., *Literary Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2006), 346.
9. Philip C. Sutton ed., *Betwixt-and-Between: Essays in Liminal Geography* (Madrid, The Gateway Press, 2002), 5.

10. Turner, 95.
11. Peterkiewicz, 94.
12. Henitiuk, 22.
13. Peterkiewicz, 43.
14. Ibid., 174.
15. Ibid., 34.
16. Ibid., 43.
17. Turner, 95.
18. Peterkiewicz, 34.
19. Ibid., 174.
20. Ibid.