

# MAGDA WOSINSKA

## 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> *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."<sup>3</sup> *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."<sup>4</sup> Only one (and this article focuses on this part), out

of the three parts that comprise the novel, directly mentions London, perceived as: “such a big and important town.”<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, the reader gains substantial insights into the city’s topography. We are, for instance, taken for a walk to Kensington Gardens, allowed to admire the Albert Memorial, and invited to take a ride on the (inner) Circle line. However, without a shadow of a doubt, it was not the main intention of the author to act as a tour guide for the reader. What is equally thought-provoking is the fact that a mentally-disabled child, nine-year-old Patrick, has been made the main character of the novel. There are probably various reasons underlying this choice of child protagonist: firstly, children perceive reality differently to adults. Not only is a child’s innocence responsible for such observations, but in the case of Patrick, it is also his illness that “dooms” him to be oversensitive and able to notice behaviours and experience feelings which are normally beyond human access, as well as to exist balancing on the verge of two worlds – the real one, and this imaginary one. The fact that he is: “neither here, nor there,”<sup>6</sup> uneasily nowhere at home, nowhere at the right place, always at the threshold, as Valerie Henitiuk puts it, “denied access to the social and familial positions that should rightfully be his,”<sup>7</sup> makes him a protagonist who is the embodiment of liminality.

In Peterkiewicz’s novel, this in-between motif seems also to refer to Romanticism, and the place of the child in Polish Romantic literature. Children were perceived as exceptional figures, capable of comprehending matters far beyond “normal” adult scope. Their ability resulted from the fact that they were not corrupted by knowledge, science and rationalism. On the other hand, however, in their solitude and isolation they stood in direct opposition to “ordinary” children, being “forced” to occupy liminal positions in their families and peer groups, let alone in respect to society at large. That is exactly how we can portray Patrick whose identity shows the

features of “double consciousness,”<sup>8</sup> 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 established social order from their empowered position of outsiders.’<sup>9</sup>

This paper examines two aspects of liminality in the novel. First, it draws the reader’s attention to the main character, Patrick, who is portrayed as existing “neither here nor there.” Second, it focuses on the way that the London tube itself is presented as a liminal zone.

## **2. Patrick’s Liminal States**

In Jerzy Peterkiewicz’s *Inner Circle*, Patrick exists as “betwixt-and-between” entity, and his liminality can be explored on several levels and with reference to all the people who are allegedly taking care of him. The boy’s “family” (I have decided to mark it this way since in this particular case, it is hard to talk about the institution of the family as understood in the conventional sense) and its situation is frequently described in Oedipal terms and the fact of his being an adoptee makes him, therefore, a liminal figure. To be precise, the character in Peterkiewicz’s novel has not been adopted by anyone and it is through his experiences that he learns “to exploit a strikingly liminal sort of survival”<sup>12</sup>. He is depicted as functioning on the edge of his tangled family relationships. He is, as may often be observed in the case of adopted children, willingly shuttled from one house to the other, none of which he can, in fact, call his home. Even while visiting his father’s apartment he is expected to function in

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.”<sup>13</sup>

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”<sup>14</sup> and the father “who disliked being woken up before half past one in the afternoon.”<sup>15</sup> However: “His two mothers were far too busy to look after him in an ordinary way.”<sup>16</sup> 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 there”<sup>17</sup> both metaphorically and literally, as confirmed by his constant existence at the thresholds of his carers’ houses. Neither does he hide his dysfunctional family, revealing this fact in the opening sentence of the Underground, Part 1:

I have two mothers, then people laughed which Patrick liked very much... My first mother is always singing, and my second mother is very kind, and she takes me for walks to Kensington Gardens. And people laughed less, and didn’t ask him about his father. Which was a pity. Because Patrick could have told them what a good sleeper his father was, by day and by night, and on the Underground too.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that while the narrator makes an attempt to persuade the readers that Patrick is satisfied with the way his “parents” perform their duties towards him, his inability to judge things properly due to the fact that he is a person inhabiting, to a

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.’<sup>19</sup>

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.”<sup>20</sup>

### **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.<sup>10</sup> 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

London tube presented in *Inner Circle* can be explored as a liminal site of transition and transgression. It is to be noticed that it functions as a microcosm of the city itself, and the city, in turn, can be regarded as a microcosm of the universe. Numerous tensions, some of them turning into apprehensions, characteristic of London are reflected there. As far as the tube's liminal character goes, its mere physical attributes are also of magnitude here. Its peculiar open-closed space, restricted by such objects like doors or windows, not to mention the omnipresent London Transport announcement, "mind the gap", imposes the necessity of some kind of transition. To enter a house or a hall, as well as the tube, means literally to cross a physical boundary between outside and inside. However, metaphorically, it is to establish a boundary between separate psychological states or experiences, to surrender oneself to a new set of conditions.

The tube is a place of transition from one state of being to another which can be defined for Patrick as a zone between his world and reality. The phrase "his world" is mainly ascribed to the boy because of his mental disability. Lameness seems to be potentially associated with liminality, though in this particular case we do not mean physical disability whatsoever. Since the tube offers a wide range of opportunities for transgressive behaviour, it is also treated like a zone between childhood and adulthood; it is here that Patrick is finally able to begin to cross the boundary between being a child and becoming an adult-like figure. While taking rides on his favourite line, he matures to a certain degree. For the boy it is a "betwixt-and-between" phase. I argue that these trips (as well as his attendance at boarding school) are a kind of Western equivalent of initiation rites. It is in the tube that he enters into a secret friendship with Boris: "Although he knew Boris didn't mean Boris, they played a game."<sup>11</sup> In Patrick's imagination Boris reveals himself to be either his friend, his

little brother, his china cat, or even himself. Everything hinges upon the boy's condition and the frequency of his bouts of mental illness.

He is able to become utterly responsible for himself. During these solitary rides, deprived of the so-called protection of his closest family, it turns out, for instance, that he has mastered the names of particular tube stations and knows exactly what his destination is, despite his difficulties with reading. In the tube, he no longer functions as a son, a schoolboy, a mentally disabled child, instead, he becomes an individual unknown to the other commuters. His journeys enable him to cross the boundary between being visible and invisible. He is just one of many daily users of this particular means of public transport. He no longer feels excluded by his milieu. There, he discovers a world operating on rules he stands a good chance of comprehending. Finally, the reader can observe his "dying" and "rebirth."

#### **4. Conclusion**

The main character of Jerzy Peterkiewicz's *Inner Circle* is "prone" from his early childhood to become a liminal individual, one retreating to the borderline. Throughout the novel, he proves himself to be unwilling, or rather unable to move off the threshold. It was partly his illness that foredoomed him to be a refugee looking for emotional and physical shelter beyond the possibilities his milieu could have offered him. It must also be acknowledged that his parents are responsible for the boy's "betwixt-and-between" position. Instead of showing vital concern for their son's proper development, with regards to various spheres, they only catered for sustenance and shelter (in fact, many shelters). As a result, they denied him true access to the familial and social positions he deserved. They sentenced him to ultimate and irreversible liminal solitude. However, this state of affairs serves to illustrate 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.