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Intertextual Illuminations: “The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall” by Henryk Sienkiewicz in Malcolm Lowry’s “Through the Panama”

ABSTRACT

The article offers a reading of “Through the Panama” by Malcolm Lowry in light of an intertext connected with Polish literature. Lowry mentions a short story “The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall” by the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, the Nobel prize winner for the whole of his literary output. What Lowry stresses in his intertextual allusion is the perilous illumination that the eponymous lighthouse keeper experiences. The article contends that the condition of the lighthouse keeper anticipates that of the Lowry protagonist who in “Through the Panama” fears death by his own book, or, to take Lowry’s other phrase, being “Joyced in his own petard.” Basing her analysis on Mieke Bal’s idea of a participatory exhibition where the viewer decides how to approach a video installation, and can do so by engaging with a single detail, Filipczak treats Lowry’s text as a multimodal work where such a detail may give rise to a reassessment of the reading experience. Since the allusion to the Polish text has only elicited fragmentary responses among the Lowry critics, Filipczak decides to fill in the gap by providing her interpretation of the lighthouse keeper’s perilous illumination mentioned by Lowry in the margins of his work, and by analyzing it in the context of major Romantic texts, notably the epic poem *Master Thaddeus* by Adam Mickiewicz whose words trigger the lighthouse keeper’s experience, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose text is quoted in the margins of “Through the Panama.” This choice allows to throw a different light on Lowry’s work which is also inhabited by echoes of futurist attitude to the machine and the Kafkaesque fear of being locked in one of the many locks of the canal “as if in experience.”

The critics of “Through the Panama” stress the importance of the machine for this and other works by Malcolm Lowry (cf. McCarthy 147–48). Michael Wutz discusses the author as the “technologist of the narrative” whose fiction is structured by machines (57). Drawing on Sherrill Grace’s handling of Ortega y Gasset’s work where an artist becomes an engineer, Wutz explores the tension between Romantic and modern concepts of art in Lowry’s published texts and holographs (59). The machine disciplines excessive detail by providing a design (Wutz 57); its significance is both symbolic and literal as I am going to prove later.

Lowry’s fascination with machinery and his use of this image as an analogue of literary creation connects with a classic futurist statement by Gino Severini: “Le procédé d’une construction de la machine est analogue au procédé de la construction d’une oeuvre d’art” (qtd. in Berghaus 24). The ambiguity of the futurist attitudes towards the machine was reflected in Marinetti’s machinolatria underpinned by anxiety and sense of threat that the spiritualized machine inspires (Berghaus 32). The same quality haunts the margins of Lowry’s text. Prior to his entry into the canal, the narrator admits that he or his protagonist is “in the realm of death” (Lowry, “Through the Panama” 37) and yet in the same work he confesses that “the canal is a work of genius” (60).

The passage through the Panama Canal is perilous enough to perpetuate a truly Kafkaesque sense of occlusion generated by the situation of the narrator being caught between the margins of his own narrative. The experience becomes a rite of passage that opens the narrator’s self to a disturbing, unclassifiable liminality. The very fact that the narrator is erroneously referred to as Kafka draws the reader’s attention to *The Trial* and the pervasive premonition that the main character will be locked in a sinister experience despite his having done nothing wrong. The mistake rings with an ominous allusion to *Under the Volcano*, where the Consul is referred to as Trotsky in response to the question about his name asked by a policeman. Shot as a communist and *pelado*, the Consul illustrates the point that a real threat can lurk in the jest. Trotsky was also murdered in Mexico. The Kafkaesque sense of occlusion in “Through the Panama” is then connected with being imprisoned in one of the intertexts, but also in one’s own text rife with Gothic menace. Occlusion becomes only too explicit when the marginalia encroach upon the narrative, thereby limiting the space between the margins.

The graphic design of the middle part of “Through the Panama” reflects the flow of the major text bound on the sides by textual shores composed of allusions to literary works or pieces of geographical and historical information. Lowry repeatedly draws attention to the materiality

of the narrative the way futurists would draw attention to the material aspects of the machine and a different kind of aesthetic beauty. Also, the machine disrupted the concept of linear time by offering the simultaneity of experiences channeled through the observer's sensory perception. Commenting on the writer's holographs, Wutz contends that "in Lowry's pictorial logic, the centre and the margin become interchangeable sites of composition" (63).

The typographical layout and the inclusion of different documents—an excerpt from a fragment of a newspaper (30), safety regulations in French and English, an immigration card in English and Spanish—turn Lowry's story into a precursor of the multimodal work where characters obsessively collect documents to provide themselves with a personal archive which underpins the message of the book (cf. Hallet 136). In fact, Lowry's anticipation of multimodal techniques is visible in *Under the Volcano*, where a tourist brochure about Tlaxcala, a railroad and bus service schedule and a writing in the public garden are among the many artefacts that complete the meaning of the narrative. As far as "Through the Panama" is concerned, Grace's article actualizes other markers of multimodality in Lowry's text by providing diagrams, photographs of documents and a photograph of a painting extensively commented on in Lowry's text, namely "The Prodigal Son" by Hieronymus Bosch ("A Strange Assembly" 190–91, 195, 206). However, the layout which is meant to imitate the simultaneity of the central and the marginal, as well as their co-existence and conflict, remains the most interesting visual indication of multimodality in "Through the Panama," with shores of comments framing the stream of the narrative. Rather than refer to contextualization advocated by Hallet in his description of a multimodal novel (145), I prefer to use the term "framing" introduced by Mieke Bal to distinguish the neutrally sounding context from the ideological message framing a work of art and thus providing a political comment that feeds into its meaning (Filipczak, "Writing with Images" 26).

While premiering her own and Michelle Williams Gamaker's exhibition *Madame B* in the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź, i.e. in the former factory owner's palace turned into a museum, Mieke Bal effected the connection between her video installation and the site that underlined the bourgeois space and ennui emanating from *Madame B*. Site responsive and participatory, the exhibition invited the viewer to structure the image of the heroine by choosing his or her interpretative path among the differently posited screens from which scenes in Emma's life cascaded simultaneously, only to be connected by the viewer's perception and consciousness. A single detail noticed in one of the simultaneously played film sequences

could give rise to a reassessment of the previous reading, because the experience was never the same (Filipczak, "Framing *Madame B*" 232, 243). Similarly, "Through the Panama" consists of interlocking messages of the main text and marginalia (or the other way around), and if you can be locked in each of the locks of the canal "as it were, in an experience" (57), to take Primrose's words, you can also be locked in an experience of reading connected with a particular intertext that is chosen from among the variety of stimuli cascading from the margins and the main text. What Lowry invites in "Through the Panama" is a "participatory" presence of the reader. Let me then suggest a hitherto barely-observed entry into Lowry's work and see how it can affect our reassessment of "Through the Panama."

Malcolm Lowry's allusion to "The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall" by Henryk Sienkiewicz in "Through the Panama" has not garnered sufficient critical attention so far. Nor has it yet resulted in the rereading of the whole work in light of this intertext. Given that Lowry's text, whose subtitle is "The Journal of Sigbjørn Wilderness," is described by the narrator as "a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts" (98), I will contend that the allusion to a short story by Sienkiewicz can provide a connection between some intertexts brought into play here. Sherrill Grace refers to the intrusion of this message into the marginalia as "abrupt and sinister" ("A Strange Assembly" 217). It is indeed because the story completes Sigbjørn's experience and the experience of his characters, as I will demonstrate.

"The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall" by the Polish Sienkiewicz must have reached North American audiences through the translation of Jeremiah Curtin, an American who spoke Russian and then decided to learn Polish. His multilingual interests involved a fascination with Slavonic languages (Rybicki 90–91). Michael J. Mikoś and Jan Rybicki revealed a significant contribution of Alma Curtin (the translator's wife) to the final stylistic shape of the English version of Sienkiewicz's texts, but her role in the translation lies beyond the scope of this article (Rybicki 107).

Lowry's erudition was unusual by any standards. He was also aware of the impact of *Quo Vadis* (translated by Curtin), a major novel by Sienkiewicz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for the whole of his epic output. This text describes the persecution of Christians in Rome during the time of Emperor Nero. In the marginalia Lowry mentions the fact that *Quo Vadis* is being filmed in Rome while he is writing his text. A lengthy excerpt on the process of filming ends with the question "QUO VADIS," which brings us back to one of the final scenes in the novel by Sienkiewicz where the title words are used. Urged by his brethren to flee Rome, apostle Peter encounters Christ outside the city. "Quo vadis, Domine?" he asks,

predictably enough. “I am going to Rome to be recrucified,” Jesus answers. At this Peter goes back to the city.

The message then is neither “quasi-allegorical” nor “neo-Platonic,” as Grace’s text seems to imply (“A Strange Assembly” 217). It is a question connected with the identity of the writer and his protagonists. *Quo vadis*, Sigbjørn Wilderness? *Quo vadis*, Martin Trumbaugh? *Quo vadis*, Geoffrey Firmin? *Quo vadis*, Malcolm Lowry? The novel by Sienkiewicz ends with the hint of the repetition of crucifixion, while one of the major echoes from the novel by Lowry is: “[t]he agony of Martin Trumbaugh is related to the agony of repeating experiences” (“Through the Panama” 47). In light of *Quo Vadis* it acquires another meaning. The word “agony” brings in the context of passion, spiritual torment, eventual unheroic demise, or ordeal. “The agony of repeating experiences” also connects with the lighthouse keeper of Aspinwall. This is how Sienkiewicz describes the main character of his short story:

It had been his misfortune that as often as he pitched his tent and fixed his fireplace to settle down permanently, some wind tore out the stakes of his tent, whirled away the fire, and bore him on toward destruction. . . . He established a forge in Helena, Arkansas, and that was burned in a great fire which consumed the whole town. . . . But it seemed to him that all the four elements were persecuting him. Those who knew him said that he had no luck, and with that they explained everything. He himself became somewhat of a monomaniac. He believed that some mighty and vengeful hand was pursuing him everywhere, on all lands and waters.

The life of Skawiński (the eponymous lighthouse keeper) immediately invites comparisons with that of Ethan Llewellyn (in *October Ferry to Gabriola*), of whom the local grocer says: “It’s like the element follows you around, sir” (123), because fire not only consumed the Llewellyns’ house but also shadowed them wherever they went. Skawiński’s misadventures intrude upon the consciousness of the narrator in “Through the Panama,” because at the sight of the man in the control tower, the narrator is emotionally hijacked by the memory of his defeats which might just as well happen again, but he is not in the know about them yet, unlike the man in the tower “who sees everything that is going to happen” (61). At the same time the man in question embodies the “human mind” in “the control tower of machinery” (Wutz 68), that is, the narrator and the writer surveying their creation.

It is quite noteworthy that while Sigbjørn first describes himself on board of the *Diderot*, he reminisces nostalgically about his place, Lowry’s

fictionalized Dollarton, which provided ample material for “Forest Path to the Spring,” where Lowry’s other alter ego is a jazz musician trying to compose his work in the surroundings that are visualized by the narrator of “Through the Panama”:

This morning, walking through the forest, a moment of intense emotion: the path, sodden, a morass of mud, the sad dripping trees and ocherous fallen leaves; here it all is. I cannot believe I won’t be walking down the path tomorrow. (26)

The narrator’s “intense emotion” which expresses his being one with the landscape echoes, of course, the same experience of the protagonist in “Forest Path to the Spring,” and that of Ethan, who finds refuge in the Edenic landscape, even if the experience is only temporary. All the protagonists yearn for freedom from the agony of “repeating experiences,” and so does Skawiński, the lighthouse keeper, who finds it astonishing that he can now sit poised for one activity connected with providing what Lowry calls “illumination” from the lantern. He is no longer tossed by his misadventures, but can enjoy the secure, if solitary, routine of an island to which his food is brought so that he can retrieve it without talking to anyone:

He gazed, and convinced himself. It might seem that he was looking at the sea for the first time in his life. The lens of the lantern cast into the darkness an enormous triangle of light, beyond which the eye of the old man was lost in the black distance completely, in the distance mysterious and awful. But that distance seemed to run toward the light.

The protagonist of “Forest Path to the Spring” and his wife gaze out to the sea from their shack at various hours of the day and night; they often comment on the natural phenomena such as the “sunrise of the dying moon” (Lowry, “Forest Path” 234) and a myriad of other light effects that turn the frequently ominous landscape into the space of mystical illumination. However, in this text, as in “Through the Panama,” the protagonist experiences closeness to the beloved woman and contact with other inhabitants, while Sienkiewicz’s protagonist seems to be totally alienated from his kin, and his only contact with the community consists in going to Sunday mass, as a result of which he is termed a decent man by other citizens. What draws attention in this context is the sinister undertone of Lowry’s protagonist’s enforced separation from Primrose, which the narrator mentions on the same page that flaunts a description of the short story by Sienkiewicz in the marginalia. It seems that the task of providing

illumination literally or figuratively is fraught with the risk of alienation and loneliness.

That the risk of any illumination is high is ironically intimated by Lowry in a passage about the lighthouse keeper:

that was the whole point about the poor lighthouse keeper of Aspinwall. That in having another kind of illumination himself, he failed to provide illumination for his lighthouse, in fact went to sleep, which no lighthouse keeper should ever do even if spiritually advanced enough to have an illumination in Aspinwall. (Lowry, "Through the Panama" 63)

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Dismissive as the comment may sound, it opens up the hidden intertextual dimension of Lowry's text through another connection with Polish literature that is not manifested on the surface. The lighthouse keeper of Aspinwall experiences illumination upon reading the invocation to a monumental Polish epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (*Master Thaddeus*) by the greatest Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz. The book arrives at the island on the boat with provisions as a token of gratitude from the Polish Society in New York where the lighthouse keeper sent his first salary. The significance of the poem to an exile like Skawiński, and to many other exiles from Poland, which did not then exist as an independent state, was overwhelming. The work offered contact with the native tongue, everyday situations, and fondly remembered objects or entertainments in the life of the Polish gentry. Finally, *Master Thaddeus* was written out of Mickiewicz's nostalgia for his family home during the time of his exile in Paris. It looked back to the times of Napoleon's war against Russia (1812), which gave rise to the renewed hope for regaining independence for the many Poles who followed Napoleon as his soldiers. The last book of *Master Thaddeus* connected with Skawiński's past as an *ułan*, a rider in the army of November uprising (1830–31), arriving at the familiar landscape of his homeland just like the characters from Mickiewicz's text had done earlier.

Curtin did not bother to consult an already-existing translation of the Polish national poem by Maude Ashurst Biggs. He provided a different version of the initial excerpt, whose first words refer to Lithuania as the fatherland, which must strike any foreigner as odd, because the Polish poem refers to what is now a separate state which used to be united with Poland, and through Mickiewicz came to represent the quintessential Polishness. The invocation mentions the basic places of worship for Catholic Poles in the times of Mickiewicz, Jasna Góra (The Bright Mount) of Częstochowa in the Polish part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ostra Brama from Vilnius in Lithuania, both associated with nationally

important representations of Madonna. The persona in the invocation of Mickiewicz's poem asks the Madonna to transport his soul back to his fatherland, and this is exactly what happens to Skawiński, whose illumination triggered by the poem takes him back home and eventually puts him to a restful sleep in the old familial haunts. This, however, ruins him as a lighthouse keeper. A boat that was deprived of the usual light crashes against the rocks and although everyone survives, Skawiński loses his job. The only thing that remains with him on his way into further exile is the book by Mickiewicz.

For the reader of Sienkiewicz's short story illumination here is both restorative and destructive. Also, it is connected with a literary work. This, in turn, connects with the experiences of Lowry's characters, in this case Sigbjørn Wilderness/Martin Trumbaugh who fears death by his own book, "by the malign forces it arouses" ("Through the Panama" 36). The motif of danger posed by a work of fiction is enhanced by the statement about the author "Joyced by his own petard" (38), which not only introduces Joyce as one of Lowry's mentors, but also emphasizes the danger posited by one's own experimental creation which can be spiritually explosive. The Madonnas from Mickiewicz's poem quoted in Sienkiewicz's story connect with "the Virgin for those who have nobody them with" (290), as Dr. Vigil puts it in *Under the Volcano* (which is remembered in "Through the Panama"). "Only the bereaved and lonely went there" (Lowry, *Under the Volcano* 290), Dr. Vigil points out, encouraging the Consul to pray for Yvonne's return, and return she does, bringing a promise of Canadian paradise where the marriage might be restored. But this restoration never happens, even if her return seems a miracle just like Skawiński's return to his homeland which takes place only in his dream vision, not in reality. Thus Aspinwall connects with Acapulco: "[w]here else," the narrator of "Through the Panama" wonders, may he pray to the Virgin of Guadeloupe?" (Lowry 39).

The lighthouse keeper's illumination cannot be accommodated by the world he inhabits. It intrudes upon his routine and carries him away into the soundscape of his youth. His experience will never be communicated to local people; they would not understand or sympathize. And yet, even though Skawiński becomes enmeshed in the book he reads and shares the fate of some of its characters, who at some stage also have to flee, he is not killed; there are no "malign forces." Norman Davies, an English historian of Polish culture, does not attribute any definite meaning to the conclusion of the story: "Is Skawiński to be blamed for reading his copy of *Pan Tadeusz*? Is Mickiewicz to be blamed for having written it?" (Davies). The potentially "sinister" story in Lowry's marginalia does not necessarily terrify. The same

goes for the uneasy gift of illumination. Grace notes in the already classic comment that “Through the Panama” is a descent into hell, haunted by echoes of *Under the Volcano* (*The Voyage* 105), but “through hell there is a path,” as the Consul puts it in *Under the Volcano* (Lowry 42). The same goes for the ordeal of Sigbjørn Wilderness. He will cross the canal and eventually reach Europe, whereas the lighthouse keeper’s journey will remain exclusively in imagination, his fatherland akin to sunken Atlantis that Wilderness/Lowry will cross on his way home.

The journey of the soul that Lowry scholar Geoffrey Durrant translates into neo-Platonic terms (42–55) can be juxtaposed to its spatial actualization. The spirit of the lighthouse keeper journeys home, and this imaginary journey creates a framing for the journey of Sigbjørn Wilderness. The liminality of the lighthouse keeper connected with him bridging the water and the land (Górnicki 150) makes him an appropriate guide in Sigbjørn’s liminal experience between the two worlds symbolized by the Pacific and the Atlantic. Their junction is also shown in the story by Sienkiewicz. The oceans symbolically meet just like the light and darkness, the sea and land, exile and home when Skawiński begins to drift into his dream vision. The seagulls follow the lighthouse keeper in hope of the remains of his food. So does the albatross follow the *Diderot* in search for the temporary shelter for her young. Both Sienkiewicz and Lowry mention only birds as companions of the human journey, highlighting the liminal status of their protagonists.

One of the recurring texts in the marginalia to “Through the Panama” is “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” which draws attention to the fact that Lowry’s use of narrators and marginalia echoes Coleridge’s strategy connected with the anxiety of authorship and attempt to provide the creator of the text with extra authority by juxtaposing “the personal voice” against that of “ostensibly objective annotator” in an act of “self-conscious glossing” (Griffiths 208). Extended passages from Coleridge’s work in “Through the Panama” highlight Lowry’s continual interest in the albatross whose presence haunts the text of the novel and acquires a sinister ring as early as in the phrase “insatiable albatross of the self” (28). The Lowry protagonist who is consigned to the “agony of repeating experiences” is also constrained to repeat the same story, one that is connected with fault, failure and its consequences. This is reinforced by a quotation from Coleridge in the marginalia: “And ever and anon throughout his future life an agony constraineth him to travel from land to land” (47). Interestingly, the message of this Romantic intertext dovetails not only with the condition of Sigbjørn Wilderness. It connects even more fully with Skawiński, whose fate is to repeat the same story of exile instead of returning to the fatherland which is lost

literally and figuratively as the lighthouse keeper is rudely awakened to the consciousness of his own guilt and the loss of good fortune. “The Mariner awakes and his penance begins anew,” quotes Lowry in “Through the Panama” (38). In some ways the Mariner’s state of mind is representative of the exilic consciousness in which the inability to return home becomes a curse and a source of grief, a familiar condition in Polish exiles. Interestingly, while Lowry was working on his *Voyage That Never Ends*, the area surrounding Vilnius (regained by Poland after WWI) was invaded and cut off by the occupying Soviets during WWII, to become irretrievably lost. It came to symbolize a “murdered Arcadia,” and “a spiritual fatherland,” finally, a myth (qtd. in Skibińska 185) to the many exiles from the area, or else it turned into the Atlantis of the past. The theme of loss, penance and Kafkaesque occlusion in the canal is thus summed up by the narrator of “Through the Panama”:

a sense of exile oppresses me. A sense of something else, beyond injustice and misery, extramundane, oppresses, more than desolates, more than confounds me. To pass this place [Acapulco] like this. Would I, one day, pass England, home, like this, on this voyage perhaps by some quirk of fortune not to be able to set foot on it, what is worse, never want to set foot on it? (38)

The passage problematizes emotions connected with self-imposed exile which is caused by different factors in the case of the Ancient Mariner, Skawiński, Trumbaugh, Wilderness and, finally, Lowry himself. However, Skawiński’s illumination lies at the heart of the unrevealed knowledge intimated by one of Lowry’s glosses. Paul Ricoeur contends that the narrative is the synthesis of the heterogenous (Taylor 130). Let me use “The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall” as a model of the narrative configuration that “mediates, integrates, grasps the manifold and brings them into one story” (Taylor 130). The Panama canal as an ordered structure regulates and channels the diverse stimuli that its observer or author of fiction wants to transform into the material for the book. The perfection of the form represented by the machine contains the fictional universe by preventing it from undermining the design. In a miniature the lighthouse keeper’s outpost also represents a regulatory mechanism connected with the form in which Skawiński’s memory is safely contained during his time as a lighthouse keeper. When up in his lighthouse, Skawiński imagines himself in dialogue with the sea, for there is no one else; he hears familiar sounds of his language in the roar of the waves but he is protected from their emotional impact by the mechanical routine connected with his job and the

light that guides him towards emotional safety. Confronted with the book that conjures up memories in such a dynamic way, unaided by the light that is not yet switched on, unprotected by the refuge in the lighthouse, Skawiński finds himself at sea spiritually. The excess of memories breaks into his mind and carries him away to finally disrupt his secure life.

Lowry's opus magnum was cut short by his death; *The Voyage That Never Ends* never actually ended because the excess of detail disrupted the disciplining meccano of the design. Considering this, the lighthouse keeper's illumination may be read as the very petard that Joyced the writer. Lowry's ironic tone smooths over the hidden emotional pitfalls of the relatively obscure intertext, and yet the message of the short story by Sienkiewicz puts the order of artistic design into question. The spiritualized meccano that defies the furies of emotional chaos is as tenuous as the life of the passengers of the *Diderot* tossed by the nightly storm.

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