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JULIEN GREEN'S *LÉVIATHAN* AND THE DEATH
OF THE OLD SELF IN *THROUGH THE PANAMA*
BY MALCOLM LOWRY

"The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts"¹. This statement was recorded in *Through the Panama* as Lawrence's comment on Ulysses, but it holds true for Lowry's text as well. In fact, the author hardly makes any attempts to transform his fiction into a classic novel. It seems that he tantalizes the reader by using one of the traditional genre names i.e. the Journal of Sigbjørn Wilderness as a subtitle of his work. Basically, the journal presupposes a linear and chronological development of a text. Lowry's work, however, complies with this dictate in the framework only. The events are placed within particular moments of the beginning and end; geographical chronology of the voyage is also rigorously maintained throughout the text. Yet, the linear composition is disrupted by notes in the margins. They run along the mainstream of the work, and since their impact upon the story is considerable, they cannot be dismissed as a mere experiment. In fact, they make the reader acutely aware of the presence and role of "the writerly text"².

The term coined by R. Barthes in *S/Z* is now a well known name for a series of cultural utterances which extend the possibilities of interpretation into infinity. It fosters a polyphony of voices, none of them gaining dominance. Consequently, no hierarchy of meaning emerges from the text which is constantly refashioned by the signifying flux³. The writerly text,

¹ M. Lowry, *Through the Panama*, [in:] *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, Penguin Modern Classics, London 1984, p. 31, 98.

² K. Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford University Press, New York 1983, p. 246-250.

³ *Ibid.*

which is normally hidden behind the deceptive unity and coherence of meaning in the work, gains a different status in *Through the Panama*. Lowry's book resembles an excavation site – the writerly text is exposed to the public in some places; in others, it is buried under a layer of thematic or stylistic allusions to other writers' works. The writerly text can be seen in operation on several levels of discourse. Notes in the margins are its overt and most provocative manifestation. Their message tends to reappear in the main text after a greater or lesser transformation. The margins are filled with the following: 1) passages quoted in extenso from a literary work i.e. Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner; 2) the author's lecture on history of the Panama Canal branching off into the symbolic vision of the canal; 3) summary of a short story by H. Sienkiewicz i.e. *The Lighthouse Keeper*. Triggered by the geographical hint (Aspinwall), the fragment concludes with a digression on the film *Quo Vadis* based on the novel by the same author.

The texture of *Through the Panama* abounds in less serious utterances e.g. Frère Jacques song, newspaper cuts, fragments of ship regulations, English Spanish transit form, excerpt of a translation exercise etc. A mixture of "incongruous parts" highlights the collage effect of the text, each element being granted of the same rank. The variety of disparate collage elements seems eclipsed by a number of statements mentioning other writers. Some of them provide brief comments on a work by a given author (e.g. Melville's *Moby Dick*, Kafka's *Trial*, Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*). Others only mention an author in connection with a particular work (e.g. J. Green's *Léviathan*). Still others sound like playful invocations of an author and/or his book (e.g. Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon/Laocoon*). Notes in the margins and statements alluding to different artists⁴ constitute textual segments of similar status. Each segment gives rise to a free play of associations because it is rooted in the reader's cultural experience. Accordingly, layers of significance from other works seem to underlie the message of *Through the Panama*. A multilevel text induces various interpretations by exposing facets of the creative process. Since the writerly text disdains hierarchy, "it can be entered at any point", any allusion is thus capable of throwing light on the whole. The text is a process⁵ that keeps generating interpretations once the reader's consciousness focuses on a particular link in the signifying chain.

The analysis of the whole writerly text is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I am going to concentrate on a statement that fascinates me, i.e. the mention of *Léviathan*, the short story by J. Green⁶. It appears

⁴ The statements do not refer to writers exclusively; Lowry makes comments on Bosch and Kierkegaard, but I am going to focus on the mentions related to fiction – writing.

⁵ Cf. R. Detweiler, *Story, Sign, and Self*, Fortress Press, Scholars Press, United States 1978, p. 110, on the role of a critic in completing the text in Barthes' views.

⁶ M. Lowry, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

in the text for no obvious reason, and unlike passages in Coleridge's poem or comments on other works in the main text, it does not seem to be developed into any powerful clue to the meaning of *Through the Panama*. The goal of my article will be to demonstrate that *Léviathan*⁷ is present in *Through the Panama* as a powerful cultural utterance. In my analysis I will focus on the biblical and theological dimension because it provides both works with a coherent interpretation. Before I deal with the biblical and theological aspect, I would like to comment on similarities in the subject and ambience of both texts. The affinities can be grouped under the following headings: 1) the motif of crossing the ocean; 2) waters as a means of causing disquiet; 3) the sense of being watched⁸.

Léviathan and *Through the Panama* tell the story of crossing the ocean. A boarding of the ship by the characters opens both texts, and the sight of distant lands closes them. The writer's attention concentrates on what happens during the voyage, and the passengers are caught in the experience which proves revealing. The main character of *Léviathan* becomes the only passenger of a French merchant ship called *Bonne Esperance* and bound for America (Savannah). In *Through the Panama* Sigbjørn Wilderness and his wife start their voyage on the Diderot in Vancouver, and the book ends with a note about their happy arrival in England.

Both texts revolve around the sea imagery which is charged with the powerful symbolism. The main character of *Through the Panama* seems obsessed with Joyce's fear of the sea: "Who knows what lives in it?" Fear of the sea is also present in *Léviathan*. The passenger tries to avoid the sight of waters. He spends most of his time in the cabin which becomes a surrogate of home. The man rearranges all objects in his own way, as if he wanted to impose some pattern on his otherwise enigmatic situation. All these efforts are probably meant to domesticate some hidden menace of the sea. In psychoanalytic register the sea is treated as an equivalent of subconscious⁹. Accordingly, the passenger's attempt to tame the sea is the attempt to control the subconscious. In *Through the Panama* there is a similar correspondence between the mind and sea imagery. Lowry seems to allude to old-fashioned romantic register in order to show how the monotony of the voyage fosters "billows of inexhaustible anguish and insatiable albatross of the self"¹⁰. Whenever the narrator turns to the

⁷ J. Green, *Léviathan ou la Traversée inutile*, [in:] *Le Voyageur sur la terre*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1989, p. 163-175.

⁸ M. Lowry, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁹ For the sea symbolism see: Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, North Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam-London 1974, p. 405-407.

¹⁰ M. Lowry, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

romantic idiom, he seems to conjure up the atmosphere that is similar to the mood of the narrator in *Léviathan*.

Nothing can exceed the boundless misery and desolation and wretchedness of a voyage like this¹¹.

These words may well be used to comment on the plight of the passenger in Green's short story. By alluding to the stereotype of voyage viewed as an ordeal, Lowry makes the reader more sensitive to the tone of anxiety that is concealed behind the flippancy of dialogues.

Another point where both works converge is the sense of being watched. The passenger of *Bonne Esperance* remains an obscure figure throughout the text. The captain is the only person who knows the man's name and other personal data from the documents. The information is, however, kept secret from the readers. The passenger shuns people; his choice of the voyage in a merchant ship stresses the fact that he wished to reduce the number of possible interlocutors. His extreme reticence and oddity of behaviour make him an object of public scrutiny. Sailors who walk past the man's cabin cannot resist the temptation to peer in at his face. Captain Suger finds himself drawn into a more sophisticated study of the passenger's self. His efforts to fathom the secret are strongly discouraged, which incurs his mounting hospitality. In fact, the readers are also forced into the position of curious observers. Unlike Suger, they are denied any remarkable initiation into the man's past. Since the narrator of *Léviathan* distances himself from the events, they can only gain some information by scrutinizing the passenger's face, clothes, room, and the scenery in which he is presented.

The main character of *Through the Panama* is definitely obsessed with a sense of being watched. Transit form from the canal zone of Panama functions in the same way as the passenger's passport in *Léviathan*. Its content is meant to satisfy institutionalized curiosity. Thus "the true freedom of every traveler is lost forever in his own world"¹². Immigration officers are seen as agents of censure and oppressive vigilance. A morbid sense of exposure to scrutiny is echoed by the fear of being taken for a spy. Lack of coherent identity makes Lowry's main character feel insecure in every place on earth. He suffers from a sense of dispossession and alienation. His sense of being watched is most powerfully expressed in the vision of God as the supreme controller, whose function is analogous to the role of the man sitting in the control tower over the locks of Panama Canal:

[...] that man sitting up in the control tower [...] who, by the way, is myself, and who would feel perfectly comfortable if only he did not know that there was yet another man

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

sitting yet higher above him in his invisible control tower, who also has a model of the canal locks before him [...] who thus is able to see everything that is happening to me at every moment – and worse everything that is going to happen¹³.

The affinity between *Léviathan* and *Through the Panama* can be enhanced by highlighting the role of biblical message implicit in both works. J. Green's short story seems to explore and refashion the motif of Jonah. The author encodes a clue pointing to the biblical figure at the beginning of his text. As soon as Bonne Esperance has left France, a spell of stormy weather sets in, and the ship is swallowed in torrential rains. The captain laughs at the trouble and comments on it wistfully:

'Ce vous qui nous devez cela'¹⁴

– he says to the passenger. The joke points back to the tradition of Jonah motif, which was taken up as early as in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and is here exhumed from the collective unconscious in an indirect form. In fact, there are quite a few striking parallels between Jonah and the passenger of Bonne Esperance. The former wishes to flee from God's presence, and is consequently banished from life¹⁵. The latter tries to shun people, and is finally destroyed by death. Both Jonah and the passenger choose the ship as a means of carrying out their plans. In both cases there is great tension between the main character and the crew. Biblical Jonah is woken from his sound sleep by the captain who asks him to pray to his god to end the storm¹⁶. In *Léviathan* the passenger is aroused from lethargy by the captain, who forces him to accept invitation to dinner, and exposes the man in this way. The crew from the Old Testament question Jonah, who confesses his guilt¹⁷. In Green's story the captain stages a quasi confessional situation by means of an encouraging remark

On peut tout me dire, vous savez. Je suis un confesseur modèle¹⁸.

The passenger declines the allusion and he tries to fulfil the second part of the ritual i.e. communion. However, he fails to see the sacred dimension that is implicit in the ceremony of sharing the meal. When he tilts the glass to his lips, his hand shakes, and he spills the wine over the white tablecloth. He is deeply shocked to see the effect. The symbolic significance of the tablecloth may be related to the man's efforts to make

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ J. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

¹⁵ L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, London 1986, p. 214.

¹⁶ *The Book of Jonah*, [in:] *Good News Bible*, Collins, Glasgow 1979, 1.6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1. 8–9.

¹⁸ J. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

a new start in life with a perfectly clean record. When the red stain disfigures the immaculate whiteness, the passenger awakes to the true perception of his life. His secret is now exposed to the captain's stare. He breaks down and tells the story of his past. The information is again withheld from the readers. Several clues are dropped, and they point to some serious transgression. However, the confession is almost immediately followed by a violent denial

Je vais en Amérique pour mes affaires¹⁹

is the last explanation on the part of the passenger. The conversation between Suger and his enigmatic interlocutor is interrupted by the cry "Terre". The captain leaves the room, and after some moments he cries "Nous arrivons". He does not know that the passenger is dead already.

Is his death a physical sign of failure on the spiritual plane, and of his inability to face the truth about himself? To claim that it is the only interpretation would mean reducing the marvellous ambiguity of Green's story. As I have said, the readers of this work have to share the ignorance of most of the crew. The perspective adopted by both sides is basically that of sailors from the Book of Jonah. When the sailors throw the prophet into the sea, the storm ceases immediately, but for them Jonah is a dead man and a propitiation sacrifice for his God. They cannot know that the crucial event in the man's life is going to happen in the waters of death²⁰, where Jonah experiences God's grace and illumination. The crew from the Bible see Jonah drown, the readers see the passenger die, his mystery remaining opaque. The passenger is swallowed by death that is not presented in any concrete shape like a big fish in the Book of Jonah²¹. The man presented in *Léviathan* is either a criminal or a Jonah whose possible illumination is again kept secret from the readers.

J. Green's story can be regarded as a powerful question about the role of death in human life. Circumstances of the passenger's death seem to point towards the metaphysical meaning. As observers of events, the readers are almost persuaded to accept the bleak finality of the ending. Yet, as the inheritors of Jonah tradition, they can intuit illumination that makes death a turning point – a breaking down of the restricting barriers of the self. Still, the illuminating mystery of death is hidden from the world.

Apart from the problem of Jonah, Green's short story alludes to the biblical narration of deluge, which is evoked via the subject and imagery. In the scenes of storms, the ship is lost in the chaos of elements. Bonne Esperance functions

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁰ J. Mc Govern, *The Waters of Death*, [in:] "Catholic Biblical Quarterly", 1959, Vol. 21, p. 350–358.

²¹ For the ambiguity of fish symbolism in the Book of Jonah, see: E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Vol. 5, Pantheon Books, New York, p. 47.

as a shelter and as a means of escape from the grip of the past. Affinity with the biblical flood is also present at the end of the story. In the last days of the crossing proximity of land is announced by birds²² and different air that is filled with fragrance of plants. People resemble Noah in his waiting for the waters to lower.

It is interesting to transpose the flood symbolism on profane geography in which Europe and America have always functioned as the old and new land. The passenger yearns to be free from the oppressive memories; therefore, he leaves behind the old world, and travels to the land of promise and renewal. The appearance of America on the horizon is like the emergence of the purified earth from the chaos of deluge. Unlike Noah, the passenger yields to the sea of death. His ark proves insufficient; it becomes his tomb.

The message of deluge evinces a strong affinity with the motif of Jonah²³. Jonah, who drowns in the waters, and Jonah who is spewed out by the fish on the dry land are two different stages of one personality. The old self is abandoned in death, the new one is gained due to God's miracle. Jonah, who overcomes the barriers of grave, resembles Noah, the representative of the new humankind rising victorious from the waters after the old humankind has been flooded²⁴.

While the deluge narrative shows the dichotomy between the old and new creation, the beginning of Green's story presents the passenger as a representative of the old race that is blasted by imminent death.

Il était grand, vêtu d'un manteau de drap usé, avec des poches énormes où ses mains étaient enfouies; le bord de son chapeau retombait sur ses yeux et cachait son visage. Il demeurait immobile, une grande valise posée à ses pieds²⁵.

In a sense, the passenger looks like a dead man enveloped in the shroud, his hands resting in inertia. When called to his cabin, he retains the look of fatigue and passivity. The scenery i.e. the quai covered with heaps of coal and pyramids of barrels generates the ambience of desolation and sterility. The scene of departure is, in a sense, the burial of the passenger's old self. This may be the reason why his name is never revealed to anybody except the captain. The voyage is probably meant to sever the links with the surroundings and former identity. The man hopes he can become someone else, his "bonne espérance" is the chance of transfiguring revival. Consequently, his actual name is of no use

²² For the significance of birds in the biblical deluge, see: *Genesis*, [in:] *Good News Bible*..., 8. 6-15.

²³ Cf. J. Daniélou, *Les figures du Christ dans l'Ancien Testament*, Beauchesne et ses Fils, Paris 1950, p. 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁵ J. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

to anybody, it has stopped signifying him. The passenger is suspended in the state of psychological vacuum, and his indefinite situation is enhanced by the amorphous aspect of the sea.

In the symbolism of elements waters have always functioned as an image of formlessness prior to any creative act. Boundless vastness is a reservoir of future choice and change waiting in their potential. For a while, however, decisions are postponed and judgements suspended. The passenger himself seems to indulge in the state of irreducible ambiguity. Besides, *Bonne Esperance* carries the cargo of raw materials; amorphous mass can again be seen as a symbol that corresponds to the main character's state of mind and situation in life²⁶.

The passenger of *Bonne Esperance* fades away into blankness, since he finds himself in the gap between the abandoned and desired self. The main character of *Through the Panama* suffers from a similar problem because he is not anchored in any particular identity. The author's observations are implicit in the words of a narrator of *Through the Panama*, Sigbjørn Wilderness; Sigbjørn, in turn, merges into the main character of his own work, Martin Trumbaugh, who, at times, fuses with other persons from Lowry's fiction e.g. Firmin. Thus, it is difficult to isolate the main character of the story, or he, must be defined as a constellation of identities which keep displacing one another.

[...] first there is dissociation, I am not I. I am Martin Trumbaugh. But I am not Martin Trumbaugh or perhaps Firmin either, I am a voice, [...] in a sense I am now a ship, but I am also a voice and also Martin Trumbaugh, and now I am, or he is in the realm of death²⁷.

The conflict of selves in *Through the Panama* seems to fulfil a similar role as the tension between the abandoned and desired self in *Léviathan*. For Malcolm Lowry, revival becomes a crucial condition on the creative plane. The problems of self, its past, death and regeneration are strongly connected with artistic sensibility. The writer who focuses on the intricacies of the creative process is trapped in the vacuum that results from a temporary exhaustion of creative potential.

The agony of Martin Trumbaugh is [...] the agony of repeating experiences²⁸.

The agony of the writer is the agony of motifs that recur and characters that reappear in the shape they used to have in former novels. Death changes from a prison keeper into a rejected manuscript, a dead text that fails to attract attention. The writer's own creativity turns against him, he

²⁶ M. Eliade, *Images und Symbols*, trans. Ph. Maird, Sheed and Ward, New York 1961, p. 152.

²⁷ M. Lowry, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

stops understanding anything because he is always lost in the flux of ideas. The voyage is reduced to foundering in an abyss of self. One of the passengers i.e. Charon seems to provide it with deadly significance. The problem that torments the writer is related to the discovery of mission, and it is clothed in intensely biblical idiom. The main character conjures up a vision of the road to Damascus²⁹, on which he will be able to understand the striving of artists. However, for the time being, darkness is his penance, and creative ideas lose themselves in chaos.

Saint Paul's illumination and conversion on the road to Damascus is another example of transition from the old self to a new one. As such, it corresponds to the motif of Jonah implicit in *Léviathan*. Lowry expresses the thirst for illumination whose effects could be analogous to the crucial experience of Jonah or Noah. They would consist in bursting the limits of exhausted self and in transcending "the realm of death". Lowry's *porte parole* i.e. Martin Trumbaugh notices "cobalt lightnings" and "sizzling sea" during the storm, and he calls the image "a vision of creation"³⁰. The arrival in England possesses a different status than the passenger's non-arrival in America in *Léviathan*. What matters is not the genesis of the land but the problem whether a new text can emerge from the writer's mental chaos.

Lowry's concern for the text is evident in his juxtaposition of *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Lighthouse Keeper* in the margins of *Through the Panama*. In both works the role of the text is different but equally crucial. The mariner experiences a healing role of the text because telling the story of his fall is the penance which can give him immortality. The lighthouse keeper finds illumination in the text that he loves and admires, but he fails on another plane by forgetting to do his duty. Beautiful and innocent text proves destructive for him. The narrator of *Through the Panama* is haunted by the idea of a novelist joyced by his own petard i.e. "killed by his novel, the malign forces it arouses"³¹. The desired text can mean a liberation from spiritual dryness or annihilation of the author's life and creativity. The author's obsession finds an unexpected equivalent in *Léviathan*; the passenger seems to be a man killed by his own story³². Green's work constitutes a revealing introduction into Lowry's plight in *Through the Panama*. It is a metaphorical illustration of different stages that the narrator finds himself in e.g. death of the old exhausted self and the state of suspension between the old and new creative life – Lowry is

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³² For a different interpretation, see: N. Kostis, *The Exorcism of Sex and Death*, [in:] *J. Green's Novels*, Boston University Press, Paris 1973, p. 41-42.

trapped in the moment of Jonah's pangs before illumination. Haunted with the vision of a novelist killed by his own book, the writer remains suspended in Green's dilemma. Will the new self and new text come into existence, or will the old text destroy the possibility of regeneration?

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**LÉVIATHAN JULIENA GREENA I ŚMIERĆ „STAREGO JA”
W *THROUGH THE PANAMA* MALCOLMA LOWRY'EGO**

Artykuł omawia rolę *writerly text* (pojęcie R. Barthesa) w powieści M. Lowry'ego *Through the Panama*. *Writerly text* obejmuje m. in. notatki na marginesach oraz odwołania do autorów i dzieł literackich zawarte w głównym tekście. Wzmianka o opowiadaniu J. Greena *Léviathan* stanowi punkt wyjścia dla interpretacji utworu M. Lowry'ego. Podobieństwa między tekstami przejawiają się w: 1) użyciu motywu podróży przez ocean; 2) traktowaniu morza jako przyczyny niepokoju; 3) poczuciu bycia obserwowanym.

W opowiadaniu *Léviathan* istotną rolę odgrywa symbolika motywu Jonasza. Utwór Greena przedstawia jakby pierwszą część losów biblijnego bohatera widzianą oczami jego towarzyszy podróży. Prowokuje to do postawienia pytania, czy ukryta przed ludźmi tajemnica przemiany losu Jonasza nie dotyczy również bohatera Greena? Obrazowanie *Léviathana* nawiązuje także do opisu biblijnego potopu. Symbolika obu wątków biblijnych wiąże się z przejściem od „starego” do „nowego człowieka” (Jonasz, Noe). Śmierć „starego ja” może oznaczać śmierć dotychczasowej osobowości twórczej bohatera powieści Lowry'ego. Pytanie czy pojawi się nowy tekst, a wraz z nim nowa wrażliwość artystyczna autora, pozostaje otwarte.