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A Polish Writer's Encounter with the United States: Andrzej Kijowski's American Journey

The United States of America has featured prominently in Polish post-World War II travel writing, including the period of communism (1945-1989). In this not so distant past, much of the context for the production and consumption of relevant works was determined by the activity of state propaganda which generally attempted to impose a negative image of "America" as the leader of the capitalist West. Interestingly, a large group of works from this period, recounting the authors' travels to the United States, seem not to have yielded too much to the demands of the official ideology and present a balanced portrayal of the visited country. The foundation on which such works grew was a well-ingrained positive image of the United States in Poland. While the intensity of state anti-American propaganda varied, the positive valuation of the symbol of "America" among Poles remained very strong throughout the period.

In this broad context, it seems that Polish writers' accounts of travel to the United States can be interpreted and theorized within the framework of Victor Turner's processual analysis, and this for two reasons. Firstly, because Turner's anthropological framework can be used – and indeed has been used – in the analysis of travel in literature, and secondly, because of Turner's important contribution to the study of one type of process: pilgrimage. Given the symbolic significance of the United States for Poles in communist Poland, it appears that at least some Polish writers' travels to the United States can be interpreted as a form of pilgrimage. In this article, the American journey that the Polish writer Andrzej Kijowski undertook in the years 1972-1973 will be discussed within this Turnerian framework.¹

Victor Turner's interest was focused mainly on one type of ritual, the rite of passage. As is known, Turner took over and built upon ideas first put forward by Arnold van Gennep in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the latter's definition, rites of passage are rites which "accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" (van Gennep 10) and consist of three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the first stage the individual or group is separated

¹ This is a modified version of a paper that was presented at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, October 16-19, 2008.

from a stable point in the social structure. In the middle, liminal period, the individual or group goes through a realm that is “in between” the previous and the new state (Turner, *Ritual Process* 94). The last stage returns the individual or group, “inwardly transformed and outwardly changed,” to a stable point in the social structure again (Turner, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality” 36).

Turner himself demonstrated how to apply this general framework to the analysis of pilgrimage. In his 1973 article “The Center Out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” he discusses pilgrimages as liminal phenomena. Several years later he concretized his original proposal. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, the book that he co-authored with his wife, Edith Turner, in 1978, theorizes pilgrimage not as a liminal but liminoid phenomenon. As the authors explain, liminal phenomena proper, characteristic of pre-industrial societies, were obligatory for the whole community. In modern society, however, with the advent of the distinction between work and leisure, certain activities became non-obligatory and participation in them, outside the confines of work, became a matter of choice. And so, “since it is voluntary, not an obligatory social mechanism to mark the transition of an individual or group from one state or status to another within the mundane sphere, pilgrimage is perhaps best thought of as ‘liminoid’ or ‘quasi-liminal,’ rather than ‘liminal’ in Van Gennep’s full sense” (34-35).

The general Turnerian processual framework has been used in the analysis of travel in literature. William Stowe in his 1994 book *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, applied it to the analysis of American travel narratives. As he writes,

Turner’s description of ritual is especially relevant for the study of travel because its three-stage structure... clearly parallels the structure of a journey.... Travel obviously involves a separation, a move into a privileged region of time and space, then a period of privileged activity, free from the demands of work and home... and finally, usually, a reintegration into the home society. (21-22)

Such was the main processual structure of the Polish writer Andrzej Kijowski’s 1972-1973 American journey. Kijowski came to the United States as a participant of the International Writing Program, run at the University of Iowa by the poet Paul Engle and his wife Hualing Nieh Engle. The organizers’ intention was to invite yearly to the United States a group of writers from all over the world, to give them time to work and exchange ideas, and to help them experience America: a gift of time and resources. Kijowski, as most other participants of the Program, spent several months in Iowa City, then – accompanied at this point by his wife – embarked on a period of travel around the

West and South of the United States, and finally returned to his home country. Could his journey be also interpreted as a form of pilgrimage?

According to Victor Turner and Edith Turner, the modern, liminoid “pilgrimage... has some of the attributes of liminality in passage rites”; among these, the authors list “release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; communitas; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values” and “movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an *axis mundi* of his faith” (34).² A later and in some senses broader definition by Alan Morinis, speaks of pilgrimage as “a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal” (4).

America did function symbolically as “a sacred periphery” and as an embodiment of valued ideals for many Poles. The historical roots of this go back to the eighteenth century. At that time, for Poland that had just lost its independence through Prussian, Austrian and Russian partitions, America, with its success in the War of Independence, was, in the words of Polish historian Jerzy Jedlicki, an example radiating “a magnetic force” (209).³ In the nineteenth century, the first waves of migration from the partitioned Poland reached America. Much of the migrants’ experience was harsh, but still, as Jedlicki observes, in comparison to the hardships they had left in Poland, “America... remained a promised land and... turned out to be a promise kept, the land of bread and freedom” (215). In the twentieth century the “magnetic force” that many Poles saw radiating from America was further strengthened. At the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points plan included a point calling for the re-creation of independent Poland. After World War II, between the years 1945 and 1995, America not only became home for over 800,000 new Polish political and economic migrants (Michałek 16), but also, and perhaps more importantly, was generally looked upon with hope as the power capable of stopping the global expansion of the new oppressor of Poland, the Soviet Union. The image of America as “the land of bread and freedom,” the embodiment of the ideals of prosperity and liberty, continued and was very vivid for Kijowski’s generation.

In 1972, the year when his American travel began, Kijowski was already an established literary critic and writer. An editor of the literary monthly *Twórczość*, he was a member of the officially recognized intellectual elite of communist Poland, but at the same time he managed to keep up a commitment to oppositional values. He published in the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*; he was also increasingly involved in oppositional political activities. After his return from America, in the late 1970s, he wrote pro-

² The concept of communitas will be defined and discussed below.

³ All translations from Polish in the present article have been done by the author.

grammatic documents for one of the Polish underground organizations, Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe [Polish Independence Accord], and acted as a lecturer in the oppositional Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych [Society of Scholarly Courses]. He was briefly interned when martial law was introduced by the communist government in 1981. In 1985 he died of eye cancer.

Information about Kijowski's travel to America can be derived from various sources. These include the book account of the journey which he published in 1982 in one of the official Polish publishing houses Czytelnik, entitled *Podróż na najdalszy Zachód* [Journey to the Farthest West],⁴ his *Dziennik* [Diary], the three volumes of which were published posthumously in the years 1998-1999 in the changed context of post-communist Poland, as well as archival material related to the University of Iowa International Writing Program and preserved at the office of the Program, and in the Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Libraries, which the present author had an opportunity to consult.

To see if the Turnerian framework can be used to interpret meaningfully and theorize Andrzej Kijowski's travel experience, an attempt will be made to determine if the analyzed sources contain a reflection of the three stages of a rite of passage that any travel seems to fit into: separation, transition (liminality), and incorporation (reaggregation). More specifically, regarding the middle stage, the analysis of the sources will also attempt to determine if Kijowski experienced any of the attributes of liminality posited by Victor Turner and Edith Turner for the modern, liminoid pilgrimage. This, if found to be the case, may give grounds to regard Kijowski's journey as a kind of secular pilgrimage.

In the general processual framework, the first stage is separation. The sources contain little information about it, yet it is not completely absent from them. Of significance may be the record of the fears that Kijowski had at that time regarding the travel. Surprisingly, he was afraid of America itself. As he wrote, "I never really believed that America exists, nor that the Earth is round" (*Podróż* 8). Of course he knew that this was all true; but just as it was difficult to experience the roundness of the Earth, so it was difficult for a Pole to experience America first hand, especially the America that was popularly imagined from a distance. As a result of this fear he avoided things American, including American literature, and once, earlier, he went as far as to refuse to go to America on scholarship. Also, he was afraid of the journey as such – afraid that it would not change anything and that all the time he would feel his old self acting. So, in his case, the separation stage seems to have been marked predominantly by fear.

⁴ Kijowski first published an account of his American experience in 1974 in ten installments in the Polish literary weekly *Literatura* (from January 3 to March 7 of that year). In the next two years he reworked this original text, which eventually was published as a book in 1982.

To Victor Turner, it was the middle, liminal stage that was the most interesting in the ritual process. The passage from *Image and Pilgrimage* quoted above lists “release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; communitas; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values” as well as “movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery” among the attributes of liminality characteristic of the modern, liminoid pilgrimage (34). To what extent are these attributes attested in the analyzed sources?

First, Kijowski certainly experienced release from mundane structure during his stay in America. It should not be surprising, as it was the intention of the founders of the International Writing Program to take the writers out of their usual environments and give them the opportunity to write undisturbed, as well as to experience America. Kijowski noted: “Paul Engle said clearly that everybody should live as he or she pleased. If they want to translate and present their works – fine, if they want to work in silence – also fine, if only they would remember what they did in Iowa City” (*Podróż* 61). In a letter to his wife, Kazimiera, in Poland he mentions the feeling of unreality which overwhelmed him: on the plains of Iowa, insulated from all typical everyday problems, he lost his sense of time and space (*Dziennik 1970-1977* 212). Also in the second part of his stay, traveling around the United States, he was away from the usual domestic or work-related concerns.

Homogenization of status also characterized his and other writers' participation in the Program. The organization of the stay in Iowa was such that all the visiting members had exactly the same status in the group, whether they were accomplished writers, or novices. They all lived in the same dormitory, named the Mayflower, and had the same rights and privileges.

Simplicity of dress and behavior seems to have gone together with Kijowski's release from mundane structure. Save for some formal occasions, there was little need to dress up or insist on complex daily behavior in the group that the writers formed, especially as they stayed together in one dormitory and were able to see each other informally many times a day. It can be supposed that also during the journey around the United States the Kijowskis tended to dress and behave in a simple way, typical of tourists.

Communitas, included in the list of liminal features, is an important – and complex – part of the framework. It can be defined in the following way: “A relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities.... It is a liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship.... It does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms” (Turner and Turner 250). Its opposite is social structure, with its status and rank distinctions, complexity, and selfishness, to name just

some of its attributes (Turner, *Ritual Process* 106-09). In Iowa the conditions seemed to be set for *communitas* to emerge: the writers participating in the Program had been taken out of their ordinary environments, invited to organize their time by themselves, and thus liberated from “conformity to general norms”; the group that they formed was characterized by homogeneity of status and, to a large extent, simplicity of dress and behavior. True comradeship often defined the participants’ interaction, even if not all of them got along together well. Yet, there may have been at least one factor adversely influencing the emergence of *communitas* in the group. The sources reflect the frustration that Kijowski felt in Iowa not being able to communicate in English. As late as three months into his stay, Kijowski wrote to his wife, perhaps with some exaggeration: “Between me and the external world there is still a ‘screen’... of incomprehensibility. *I do not understand anything*. I do not understand conversations in films, television commentary, radio programs, or what people are saying to me.... I hide from people, which must make an awful impression on them” (*Dziennik 1970-1977* 200-201; original emphasis). He worked on his English but problems with communication would recur. It can be suspected that such involuntary absence (or significant restriction) of verbal communication among the members of the group – Kijowski was not the only person unable to speak English sufficiently well – may have made the emergence of *communitas* among the writers more difficult than it otherwise would have been.

Was there ordeal in Kijowski’s experience, as a liminal feature of pilgrimage? It seems so, although it was different from the physical effort that a traditional pilgrim makes. Acute inability to communicate, apparently lessened in time, seems to qualify under this category. In Iowa, before the arrival of his wife and the beginning of the trip around the country, there was also melancholy, loneliness and nostalgia.

Reflection on the basic cultural or religious values was certainly an important feature of Kijowski’s American experience. The stay in America offered ample opportunity for this. For instance, in the seclusion of his stay in Iowa, he pondered the role of men and women of letters in the modern world, and, evoking the concept of clerisy, he reached quite a radical Coleridgean-Eliotesque conclusion:

We are in today’s world what priests and monks were in the old world: the people on which the world places all the troubles of spiritual life.... Culture is the religion of the modern world, and we are the clerisy of this religion, that is sacrificial animals whom rich societies feed and breed to convince themselves that they are *cultured*. And the poor ones do this in order to seem richer. (*Podróż* 91; original emphasis)

Contact with nature during the trip around the United States also often induced him to reflect on basic values. Traveling across a desert he thought critically of the modern

world: "Our lives are too gentle. Our civilization is too gentle. Everything falls into place too simply.... We tame daemons and send gods into retirement. We do not answer important questions.... Our souls have paled. We are too secure; too sure of our existence; we are too much embedded in it" (*Podróż* 193).

On return to Poland, Kijowski must have gone through a stage of reaggregation. The analyzed sources contain no record of the time immediately after his departure from Iowa: his book account ends when, having completed the tour of the United States, he and his wife leave Iowa for good (May 1973); the published diary, after a late April 1973 entry from Houston, Texas, resumes only with a July 1973 entry written in Warsaw, Poland. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be inferred about Kijowski's reaggregation. Most importantly, his diary shows that, in agreement with the Turnerian framework, back in Poland he returned to a stable point in the social structure: he resumed work as an editor in *Twórczość*, and soon embarked on new writing projects. And more than this. As it seems, in a manner similar to a religious pilgrim "entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu" (Turner and Turner 8), Andrzej Kijowski was transformed by his American travel. Already during the journey he noticed changes taking place in him. Contact with nature during his tour of the country repeatedly played a role in this. About his travel across a desert, he wrote: "I keep looking through the window, as if I could see my thoughts in the emptiness out there. And in this emptiness – I grow, I purify myself, a superb order is created within me and I feel important, significant, boundlessly energetic" (*Podróż* 192). Or in Muir Woods, on seeing a cross-section of one of the giant trees: "Faced with these dates written in small print into the rings of the sequoia, I felt quite a new joy of life and quite a new, previously unknown, curiosity of the world. Oh, world, I thought, if you are really worthy of delight and study, you are one" (*Podróż* 213). Admittedly, it is difficult to assess how lasting these feelings were. Yet, their presence may indicate a deeper transformation happening or about to happen: Dariusz Skórczewski suggests that the passage recording the experience from Muir Woods prefigures Kijowski's fundamental turn towards the transcendental, visible in his later activities and writing (93). There were also other, more tangible changes. During his stay, in time, Kijowski appears to have improved his command of English, at first enough to communicate during the trip around the United States (at this stage he abandons dramatic complaints about his English), and then to correspond with friends in Iowa.⁵ Even more importantly, back in Poland, he

⁵ The correspondence between the Kijowskis and the Engles lasted from the 1970s into the 1980s (see Andrzej Kijowski's letter to Paul Engle, dated November 13, 1974, or Andrzej and Kazimiera's letter to Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle, dated December 4, 1983). No indication has been found whether Kijowski (or the Kijowskis) ever received any help with writing their English letters.

firmly lists America among his interests and occasionally comments upon developments in the United States. It may be remembered that he confessed that before the trip he did not really believe in America, and that he avoided things American, including American literature. Yet, writing about the moment when he arrived on the West Coast, a short time before his departure from the United States, he observes: “Going west all the time, I reached the Pacific Ocean, which turned out to be to east of Warsaw. The Earth is really round – I thought to myself lazily... – and this is in fact the only thing that I wanted to know” (*Podróż* 203). Apparently he saw it, and he believed – in this, and in the reality of America. And he decided to write about his experience: first in installments for the literary weekly *Literatura*, and then to work on a book. A year after his return, writing in his diary about his *idées fixes*, he placed “America – the experience of space” high on his list (*Dziennik 1970-1977* 249). He certainly no longer avoided things American. In a way he brought America with him, in him, to Poland.

As the final question, one might want to ask if, in Kijowski’s personal experience, this was a journey from a mundane center to a sacred periphery (as Turner phrased it), or a journey in quest of a place embodying a valued ideal (in Morinis’s definition). Also here the answer seems to be positive, despite Kijowski’s pre-travel fears and the old wish not to know anything about America. For to him the place did embody a valued ideal, and had a certain sacred, mythical quality. Remembering his arrival in New York, he wrote:

The Empire State building... was built exactly when I was born.... And then everything that was extraordinary, came from here: records, inventions, oddities, cinema. It is New York, not Baghdad, that was my fable land, in which millionaires and film stars played the role of princes and princesses. Whatever happened to this myth afterwards, it has left at least this archaic layer that was enough to raise fever in me and in all those who would come here. (*Podróż* 29)

And America? This was the place where one could see one’s own life, so successful or so unsuccessful as it could be. As he wrote, “Each of us could be an American, because each of us strives for prosperity for which immigrants came here from all over the world. This country is a young group creation of humanity, a utopia of success, which has turned out so well – and at the same time so badly – as only a utopia can turn out” (*Podróż* 138). To Kijowski, America was a country where everything was possible; a country which, despite all its unresolved problems, many of which he noticed and commented upon, offered the freedom to live one’s life as one

wished.⁶ In some very important senses, a sacred periphery indeed for a citizen of communist Poland.

Briefly to conclude, the Turnerian model of processual analysis seems to offer a good framework in which to interpret and theorize Andrzej Kijowski's encounter with the United States. Generally, it makes it possible to see the experience of travel within a broader perspective, one that includes also the pre-travel and post-return stages. Because of the particular historical and political conditions that defined Polish-American relations, and because of the more individual conditions in which Kijowski's journey was made, it would seem that his cross-cultural travel can be seen more specifically as a form of pilgrimage. Even if not all the attributes of liminality posited for modern, liminoid pilgrimages were fully realized here (quite conspicuously, *communitas* appears to have been made difficult because of language problems during the Iowan phase of the stay), the analyzed sources contain a reflection of many such attributes present and experienced. It would seem that through his travel to the United States, Andrzej Kijowski, a bit to his own surprise, made a pilgrimage which returned him changed – as well as spiritually and intellectually richer – to his home society; a significant gain to a writer, critic, and a thinking and feeling, man.

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⁶ The inclusion of some of the criticisms may have also been an ingenious way for Kijowski to try to ease the passage of the book through the hands of state censors, who had to approve the book before it could be published.

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