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The role of language in the theological framework of *Inner Circle* by Jerzy Peterkiewicz

ALEKSANDRA WISNIEWSKA

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Abstract

The article attempts to analyse selected aspects of the novel *Inner Circle* by a lesser-known Polish émigré writer Jerzy Peterkiewicz in order to argue that the author presents in his work a highly sacramental and liturgical view of language. For this purpose, the article also engages with a number of critical standpoints on the relationship between language and theology. The key narrative elements analysed include the structure, the creation of characters, the role of language and performance of the body, elements of the plot and references to the Christian theological tradition.

Keywords

language, Christian theology, Catholic novel

Rola języka w teologicznym kontekście powieści *Inner Circle* Jerzego Peterkiewicza

Abstrakt

Artykuł stanowi próbę analizy wybranych aspektów powieści *Inner Circle* autorstwa mniej znanego polskiego pisarza emigracyjnego

Jerzego Peterkiewicza, aby wykazać, że autor przedstawia w swojej pracy wysoce sakramentalne i liturgiczne podejście do języka. W tym celu artykuł odnosi się również do szeregu krytycznych stanowisk dotyczących relacji między językiem a teologią. Kluczowe analizowane elementy narracji obejmują strukturę, kreację postaci, rolę języka i ekspresji ciała, elementy fabuły oraz odniesienia do chrześcijańskiej tradycji teologicznej.

Słowa kluczowe

język, teologia chrześcijańska, powieść katolicka

Jerzy Peterkiewicz (Pietrkiewicz) may not seem an obvious contribution to a discussion about religious themes in modern English literature. His work is hardly ever, if at all, mentioned in the context of other religiously-oriented twentieth-century authors recognised in the field of literary studies, and the critical works tend to focus on literary giants of the calibre of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark or David Lodge who, apart from developing unique writing styles and techniques, unquestionably contribute to what can be called a canon of Catholic literature in England.[1] The absence of Peterkiewicz may well be understood. Firstly, Peterkiewicz was born in Poland, and the little recognition he got built slowly, as did his mastery of the English language.[2] Secondly, he is usually recognised for his poetry and translation work (he is the only personally authorised translator of poetry by Pope John Paul II) rather than prose. What is more, on exile he made a conscious decision to publish poetry exclusively in Polish, and prose exclusively in English (https://

[1] See Ker (2003), Crowe (2007), Griffiths (2011) and Słyszewska (2021).

[2] Upon his arrival in England on the outbreak of World War II, he could not speak a single word in English. Supported by the British Council, he graduated first from the University of St Andrews (1944) and then King's College (1947). For over thirty years, he was a lecturer at the school of Slavonic and East European studies at London University. In 2005 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Letters by his former University of St. Andrews (https://jpef.co.uk/pl/biography/).

jpef.co.uk/pl/biography/). As a foreign writer, and one writing poetry for a very limited audience in England, he remained largely in the literary shadows of his contemporaries, in spite of favourable reception from the critics and his fellow-writers.[3]

Notwithstanding this, his prose shares many similarities with literary masterpieces of the twentieth century (both religiously-oriented ones and those seemingly uninvolved in religious considerations).[4] *Inner Circle*, published in 1966, is one of his most prominent and complex works, characterised by rich themes and stylistic ambition. Its exceptional quality lies also in its original structural design. The triptych structure of the novel includes three stories told alternately (3 times each) by three different narrators and located in three different periods of time in the history of mankind: post-Paradisiac garden ("Sky"), modern London ("Underground") and futuristic England ("Surface"). Such an arrangement clearly shows Peterkiewicz's interest in numerology, but more importantly, it contributes to the theological framework of the narrative. By drawing from the biblical symbolism of number three that denotes completeness and emphasis, Peterkiewicz indicates that the three parts are not disconnected but they constitute a coherent, complete whole united primarily by one overarching religious metaphor (https://www.christianpublishers.org/post/numbers-in-the-bible-their-significance-and-use).

In terms of the main themes, the novel is an elaborate commentary on the central Christian (and, one could even argue, specifically Catholic) notion – that is, the mystery of the Incarnation and the inherent presence of God in His creation. One of the most prominent elements that contribute to this presentation is the use of language in the story. Before analysing this particular aspect of Peterkiewicz's work, a few approaches towards language and its theological potential in literature will be evoked, as they seem central to the discussion of the novel and

[3] See e.g. Burgess (1970), Cieplińska (2014).
[4] See Cieplińska (2013).

facilitate the understanding of the sacramental aspect of language, specifically (although not exclusively) in literary fiction.

As Wesley Kort indicates in his work *Narrative Elements and Religious Meanings*, in literature that takes theology as its main concern, language has the potential to disclose the mysterious and inherent presence of the infinite in the finite, and by doing this, it may serve to explore the ability of literature to tell the truth about what is unattainable to the senses, to say "the right thing", to use "the perfect name" (9). On the other hand, however, the engagement of language with theology entails its concern with matters which elude description; in such a case, language is necessarily (and paradoxically) oriented towards expressing the inexpressible. Therefore, as Kort states, at times words prove insufficient (9). When the theological aspirations of language are confronted with its limitations, according to Kort, two opposing directions emerge. One leads "from theology to prophecy, to saying something about everything or everything about something, to the explosion of glossolalia and then to silence", while the other insists on the scarcity of words in an attempt to say "more and more with fewer and fewer words – to the total concentration of silence" (9–10).

Although Kort poses a convincing argument that the primary concern of theologically oriented language is to disclose the mystery, to present what eludes presentation, the two standpoints that he suggests may not be exhaustive. A somewhat more hopeful (and, in terms of literature, helpful) theory, and one that closely reflects the Christian (or, rather, Catholic) view of the divine presence in the world and in language is presented in *God Talk* by John Macquarrie, who insists on the incredible sacramental potential of human language as one of the finite entities imbued with the infinite:

> God graciously confers upon our human language the capacity to speak about himself. Just as God has condescended to become flesh in Jesus Christ, so he permits his divine speech to be expressed in human speech. This is *analogia gratiae.* It depends not

> on the characteristics of our human language but rather on what God does with this language (48–49).

Macquarrie's view of language is clearly analogical and consists in the interrelation between human and divine speech. A slightly different approach, but one based on similar premises, is taken in *Towards a Christian Poetics* by Michael Edwards.[5] In his work, Edwards argues that the biblical event of the Original Sin as described in the Book of Genesis affected not only humanity itself, but also its language. Therefore, language is viewed by Edwards as corrupt and disconnected from God's creation. However, as Edwards also claims, it still holds the potential for revealing "glimpses" of the divine reality.[6] Edwards analyses the history of language in terms of the initial downfall from a perfect creation to corruption, which eventually leads to a final uplift. In this way, it resembles the biblical narrative of Creation, the Fall and Redemption.

The same process, as will be argued, is central in Peterkiewicz's novel, and concerns the structural and thematic aspects of the narrative as well as the way it makes use of language. One of the main assumptions of this article is that language in the fictional world of *Inner Circle*, although it is imperfect and insufficient in many ways, still holds the potential to reveal "glimpses" of the divine (through the actual words, silence and performance). It will also be argued that language in Catholic fiction,[7] although at times it points to the value of silence, nothingness or lack of meaning, may be not only analogical or sacramental, but also liturgical.

Peter Ackroyd, in his work devoted to different aspects of English literature, suggests that the specific awareness and

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[5] The conversation with Edwards about his work took place on 19 May 2018 in Gdańsk when he was a guest at the Between.Pomiędzy festival.

[6] Edwards ascribes this potential primarily to poetry, but he admits that a similar quality applies also to painting, dance and other arts.

[7] I believe that Peterkiewicz's work can be categorised as a Catholic novel, since it makes an extensive use of specifically Catholic themes and imagery. Some of those aspects will be analysed in the following sections of this article.

experience of liturgical language is a great advantage of a Catholic upbringing and, when acquired in early stages of a writer's life, it may influence the way they employ language in their work: "Chanting those Latin chants for your formative years is a great help when trying to write English prose. The greatest gift religion can give anybody is the use of language" (qtd. in Appleyard 1989: 53). The treatment of language that Ackroyd refers to is characteristic of liturgy before the Second Vatican Council[8] and is largely limited to the role of a specific language in liturgy. This article takes a broader approach by referring to the definition of liturgical language provided by Etienne Assely in "On the Multi-Faceted Character of Liturgical Language", who defines it as "a complex of words and gestures to convey meaning grasped by worshipers speaking different dialects and tongues" (1). In this way, the performative and metaphorical character of language is foregrounded, and its potential for connecting various groups is stressed. In *Inner Circle* Peterkiewicz presents an approach based on similar assumptions, emphasising the importance of bodily performance and metaphor as well as the role of sacraments in the presentation of the Catholic worldview.

Part one of the novel, entitled "Sky", tells the story of Adam and Eve in the postlapsarian reality, with the world growing more and more hostile and strikingly different from their original home, Paradise. The changes are particularly painful to Eve (the narrator of this part), abandoned by her children and her companion. The separation from Adam is physical, as he continues the mission of the animals' caretaker entrusted to him by God. The growing distance between Adam and Eve is also marked by differences in the way they use language to communicate, relate to the world around them and, most importantly, to their Creator. While Adam insists on referring to

[8] In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a number of changes in different aspects of the life of the Church were introduced, including the acceptance of vernacular languages to be used in the liturgy in the place of Latin (https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/VaticanII).

Him as "Our Father", Eve is determined to use a different, much less tender name: "[Adam] began to speak about his 'Our Father', the Sky Man, whose image sometimes appeared in the likeness of two circles" (71). Full of suffering and resentment at the punishment she receives, Eve rejects God as her Father, seeing him as a vague and distant figure.

Gradual and progressive disruption of the relationship between God and humanity is reflected in two other parts of Peterkiewicz's novel. Patrick, the mentally disturbed protagonist of "Underground", a schoolboy instructed by priests in what seems to be modern London, is utterly confused about who his mentors are and what they should be called. As a result of his mindless reaction to their instructions and expectations, he refers to them as "No-fathers" and "Yes-fathers". At the same time, he remains very respectful towards his own father whom he greatly admires – although in the novel the parent is depicted as a drunkard and an unfaithful husband. Confusion, misunderstanding and moral and spiritual impoverishment characterise this part, and it is Patrick's peculiar use of language, often devoid of a clear sense of how words should relate to the surrounding world, that only stresses these qualities. The purpose of language and the truth behind it seems lost to the boy, and the fact that "Underground" echoes some of the themes employed in "Sky" (not only the figure of a father, but also the role of trees and the mysterious metaphor of a circle) indicates distinctly that the fictional world created by Peterkiewicz in different parts of the novel slowly degrades from perfect creation to downfall.

The process seems to continue in "Surface", chronologically the last part of the novel set in distant future governed by the mysterious alien race, where people's actions and the whole environment are governed by technologically advanced "Sky Men" who never physically appear and are only vaguely visible in the sky. This part presents a futuristic world where food in the form of flakes of bread is sent from the sky (bringing to the reader's mind the Old Testament manna) and people visit "hygienic

boxes" to rethink their past and change their behaviour (thus fulfilling a similar role to that of confessionals); the role of a name-giver is assigned accidentally (and not with a profound purpose, as in the case of Adam), and the only child that is born in the sterile world is fathered by a liar, a coward and a profligate. The absence of a Father (in the spiritual, moral and even physical sense) is truly and utterly destructive. Even though the presented world is distinctly abstract, certain elements of the Catholic tradition, such as the sacrament of the Eucharist or confession, are still vaguely recognisable, which further indicates that all parts of the novel, although they are very different, are nevertheless connected through themes, metaphors and theological framework.

Language stresses the connection between the individual parts as clearly as the main themes, and suggests vital similarities between them. At the same time, however, it indicates that the world is governed by a slowly degrading system of values: the idea of God the Father is first reduced to the name "the Sky Man", later misunderstood and belittled to "Yes-fathers" and "No-fathers", and eventually presented almost grotesquely in the image of a distant alien race controlling virtually all aspects of people's lives, including their bodily functions.

The pitiful state of mankind, reflected in the gradual degradation of language, is presented most vividly in the last part of the novel, where names given to places and even people, once full of meaning and revealing the truth about the world, mean strikingly little. The narrator of "Surface", when trying to establish his current location, comments on: "those stupid old placenames which in fact signified next to nothing" (10). He also refers to geographical names in the following way: "the imaginary boundaries of something once called London or Leeds or Llandudno" (10). The connection between words and the physical world is lost, as mankind loses the ability to properly name the geographical reality that surrounds them. What is more, they are unable to name even themselves. The characters in this part of the novel do not have proper names (or at least their names

have long been forgotten), therefore, provisional names must be invented – names that, again, carry little meaning, value or truth. For instance, one of the wives of the main character is referred to as Rain, a word that signifies very little in the futuristic reality, as it hardly ever rains at all in this barren place: "the real rain was very rarely allowed to pass through the openings in the adjustable sky above the millions of heads like ours" (9). The name of the second wife, September, is equally devoid of meaning – as the narrator says: "the month of September apparently kept returning each year, though as a rule we didn't bother about the seasons and the months that were supposed to belong to them" (9).

When comparing the situation of Eve in "Sky", and the characters in "Surface", the process of gradual detachment between words and their meaning becomes visible. This degradation of language, its growing inability to signify, to refer to valuable aspects of the world, seems to reflect a substantial change in the approach of mankind towards God and indicates a destructive separation from their original destiny intended by the Creator.

This growing and painful estrangement from God affects the language of the narratives, but also, through language, the characters' identities as well, Eve being the most vivid example. Her name cannot be uttered by others, as its sound is lethal to all living creatures. Her original image as the one who gives life is abolished – instead, she becomes the one who brings death. This destructive image is further strengthened by the deadly power of her gaze – no creature can look her in the eye, or else it is blinded. This change of identity, inseparably linked with language, is expressed in the novel in a very physical way – in the attitude she takes towards her own body:

> Without hearing the sound that belongs to me I feel that my body belongs to me less; and this must be age, nameless in growing separate. My husband's age also appears to me through separation, and so I see his name growing apart from his body" (62).

Due to the silence that surrounds her name, Eve gradually loses the sense of who and what she really is. A clear connection is made between language, identity and the body. The insistence on the importance of the body is another feature that connects the three parts and places Peterkiewicz's novel in the liturgical framework. Assely Etienne in his essay on liturgical language recognises that it necessarily involves not only speech, but also action, gestures performed by the body. In this regard, one of the most prominent passages in the novel is the scene in "Surface", where Eve witnesses the death of Adam. Her account is carefully designed by Peterkiewicz to echo the event from the pages of the Gospel. She says:

> Now I was looking at his [Adam's] body, naked as the white bark of the tree, his bound arms stretched out in a gesture welcoming us both, his son and his wife, to the two skies beyond us. Adam's eyes were closed, his legs drawn together, and with his body thus propped up against the tree, he appeared to be resting after a long journey (186).

Her description strikingly resembles the traditional image of Christ on the cross, inspired by the canonical Gospels depicting His death: the stretched arms, the nakedness and the position of the body, the presence of two figures: the mother and the son.[9] The connection is further strengthened by the fact that in his letters, St. Paul refers to Christ as "the Last Adam" (1 Cor 15:45). The image in Eve's account strongly suggests the possibility of final reconciliation, through sacrifice, of God and humanity. Although many aspects of *Inner Circle* draw heavily from the narrative of the Old Testament, the novel, by foregrounding the role of the body, also refers to the New Testamental message

[9] In particular, see John 19:18. Interestingly, Peterkiewicz seems to describe the scene of Eve giving birth to one of her children in similar terms: her body hanging from a tree, her arms are strapped to the bough, two figures at her side (her husband and son), pp. 119–120.

of love and forgiveness that brings to an end the post-lapsarian misery and detachment from God.

Apart from stressing the importance of gestures and actions of the body, Peterkiewicz connects the three parts of the novel through the metaphor that suggests coherence and completeness. The key element is the eponymous symbol, a circle within a circle. In "Sky", Adam, explaining to his son the meaning of this sign drawn in every place people inhabit, states that the outer circle denotes God's original relationship with man, while "the inner circle is what has to be filled or emptied inside you" (72). The two circles represent a close relationship between God and man. The inner circle represents human nature and free will – the ability to choose or reject divine gifts. Adam, unlike Eve and their offspring, seems to comprehend the mystery behind the symbol; his understanding even exceeds the Old Testament perspective, as he notices also the third element of the sign, oriented towards future events: "this third circle could not be understood by man until it became visible and until man broke it with his own weak hands" (71). These words may be interpreted as a reference to what Christianity recognises as the central event in the history of mankind, the final redemption through the hands of Jesus Christ, whose divine power is made perfect only in his humanity and suffering. In this way, Peterkiewicz depicts the relationship of God and men as necessarily involving the coming of Christ, His visible and tangible presence on Earth, His humanity, sacrifice and death, as well as His constant sacramental presence within the "circle": a small round shape of the Eucharistic bread.[10]

The same message is echoed in other parts of the novel, although its presentation is adapted to individual circumstances – in the second part it is hinted through the Inner Circle tube line which allows Patrick to travel without interruption, and in the

[10] The specific (and symbolic) round shape of the Sacred host has a long tradition and reaches back as far as the beginnings of Christianity itself, although in some denominations square shape is also allowed (https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01349d.htm).

third part the notion of a circle is expressed through the movement of the characters who, by holding hands and constantly moving in a circle, avoid being trampled by the pressing crowds. They manage to reach their intended destination, a forbidden place, an island surrounded by water, with a tree in the middle – the only tree that grows in the barren land. It is instantly offered the central position in the human circle. The narrator says: "we moved in our habitual manner, the first, the second, the third round and within our encircled space which usually was empty, stood a tree" (82). Although the fragile plant, the only sign of life in the dead landscape, is violently devoid of its fruit and finally devoured, it nevertheless manages to bear fruit. Firstly, one of the wives who feast on it bears a child (which is impossible in the world of the omnipresent control and sterility), and secondly, the two remaining seeds give birth to new vegetation that transforms the landscape. In the novel, the image of a tree, similarly to the circle, acquires sacramental significance: like the Cross, it is a source of death and new life; like the Eucharist, it provides strength and spiritual nourishment to those who receive it. It awakens their minds and bodies.

In Peterkiewicz's novel, language, although initially it fails to reflect reality in a truthful or valuable way, is presented as analogical and liturgical. It reflects divine immanence in the world and relates to the central mystery of Christian theology, the Incarnation of Christ, his suffering and redemptive sacrifice. It also reveals the two features that Etienne sees as central for the liturgical context – it is metaphorical (connecting the three parts through the metaphor of a circle within a circle) as well as performative (insisting on the key role of the body and its performance in "sealing" people's commitment to God).[11] Peterkiewicz perceives the mystery of the event of Jesus Christ as

[11] "Liturgy is not simply speech, or dialogue between God and his people; it is also action, covenant; God acts and the people commit themselves to him. His action and his gifts take form in signs and essentially in the sacraments; the commitment of the people to God is sealed by gestures and rites and not simply by words" (Chupungco, ed.,1998: viii).

transcending spatial and temporal aspects of the world, present in all times and in all places, constituting not a historical event, but rather a point of reference to future as well as past events.

In *Inner* Circle, the organisation of each part is carefully designed and Peterkiewicz employs diverse imagery to present three seemingly different stories. Yet, they all reveal vital correspondences and together they convey the pattern that seems deeply rooted in the Christian (and, in some aspects, specifically Catholic) tradition. What connects them is their sacramental aspect, inherent in the traditional Christian narrative of Creation, the Fall and Redemption. Language substantially contributes to this presentation, and its profoundly sacramental and liturgical potential help to mediate the presence of the spiritual in the physical, and allows the divine to meet and transform the human. Another unifying element in the novel is the metaphor of the two circles –present in all the parts and recognised (even if only vaguely) by the characters that belong to different times in the history of mankind. As Etienne states, „taken as parallel structure of the liturgy or as figure of speech, metaphors bridge the gap between the ordinary and the sublime and disclose realms of realities that glue members of liturgical communities" (9).

The choice of words, of proper language, is a challenge for writers in general, and it is an even greater challenge for writers who treat the world as a space where the human meets the divine (or, to be more precise, where the divine is inherently present in the human), and who attempt to convey this interdependence in their work. Michael Edwards in *Towards a Christian Poetics* elaborates on the notion of the "theology of language", and argues that human language, although flawed as a result of the original sin, can still become a vehicle of truth about God and His creation (12). Edwards seems to suggest that human language is analogical as well as dialectical, that is, on the one hand it retains the original quality of the divine language to shape and modify reality, but, on the other hand, it has lost its direct connection with the world – the same role it fulfills in Peterkiewicz's novel. This duality makes language a pivotal

element in the creation of literary fiction, a factor that serves to develop Christian (and Catholic) literary imagination, at the same time being one of its greatest challenges.

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Aleksandra Wisniewska
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3465-3635
University of Gdańsk
Institute of English and American Studies
ul. Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
aleksandra.wisniewska@ug.edu.pl