"...beyond the invisible barrier at Portage and Main": Liminality in John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death*

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Introduction: John Marlyn

• born on April 2, 1912 in Nagy Becskerek, Hungary
• emigrated to Winnipeg when six months old
• changed name from Janos Mihaelovitcz to John Marlyn
• attended University of Manitoba to study literature in 1930
• moved to London to work as script reader for film studio
• returned to Ottawa in 1938 to work as writer for government
• taught creative writing at Carleton University from 1963-1967
• won Senior Canada Council Arts Award in 1969 and Ontario Arts Council Award in 1975
• moved to the Canary Islands in 1990s
• died of a heart attack on November 16, 2005
Introduction: *Under the Ribs of Death*

- first published by McClelland and Stewart in 1957
- (pre)released as “Onkle Janos” in Queen’s Quarterly in 1954
- draft, revised and final versions archived at U of Calgary
- received Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award and English Senior Writing Fellowship of the Canada Foundation in 1958
- genre: immigrant novel
- mode: social realism
- Title,epigraph: from John Milton‘s *Comus* (1634)
- narrative situation: figural narration
- protagonist: Sandor Hunyadi
- setting: Winnipeg, 1913-1932
Ethnic Identity and Liminality

Sandor Hunyadi comes from Hungarian immigrant family
• feels inferior and disadvantaged to Anglo-Canadian majority
• identifies with mainstream culture and disapproves of immigrants and foreign ways
• faces multilingual situation: Hungarian, German, English
• terrorized by English gang: “Hunky, Hunky—Humpy Ya Ya”
• experiences “communitas” (V. Turner) in multi-ethnic red fence gang
• assimilates to host society and anglicizes name to Alexander Humphrey and later to Alex Hunter
• regards himself as Canadian (neither Hungarian nor English)
Male Sexuality and Liminality

Sandor Hunyadi is a teenage boy (no more child, not yet adult)

• senses awakening sexuality:
  – plays doctor and nurse with childhood friend Mary Kostaniuk
  – aroused by a girl’s black cotton stockings and pink flesh of her thighs

• feels homoerotic desire for red fence gang members:
  – Buggsy’s, Frenchy’s and Hank’s chest hair triggers “a yearning so intense to be a man already” and later “a vague stirring in his loins”

• initiated into manhood by Mrs. Waldchuk at age 15

• has sexual affairs with women because he feels lonely

• experiences “true” love, “happy” marriage and fatherhood with Mary Kostaniuk
Sandor Hunyadi grows up in working-class community of “mere bricklayers and plasterers and sewer-diggers”

- fantasizes about group of successful middle-class businessmen at Royal Alexandra Hotel
- intends to take white-collar job and climb social ladder
- employed as assistant manager in real-estate agency owned by death figures Mr. Nagy and Fraulein Kleinholtz
- fails to get job in financial company due to “discrimination beyond the invisible barrier at Portage and Main”
- meets Mr. Lawson and his yuppie friends for lunch
- changes from employee to employer but remains “in an orbit far removed from the centre”
Urban Spaces and Liminality

Sandor Hunyadi lives in Winnipeg, a city divided by social position, financial status and economic power

• grows up on Henry Avenue and Selkirk Avenue in North End, a poor working-class neighbourhood next to freight yards
• takes part-time job in River Heights, a South End suburb populated by wealthy middle-class Anglo-Canadians
• picks up his uncle Janos Daffner at Canadian Pacific Railway Station on Higgins Avenue, a place of transit for immigrants
• works in real-estate agency on Main Street, which represents business area in city centre
• plans to build spacious house in South End but ends up in run-down North End apartment
Sandor Hunyadi lives in interwar years, a period marked by First World War, Stock Market Crash and Great Depression

• rejected for job due to nativist prejudice and war hysteria
• senses financial turmoil of Roaring Twenties
• trusts big business leaders to avert economic crisis
• blames try-to-get-rich-quick mentality of workers and employees for bringing about collapse
• goes bankrupt, loses business and stays out of work
• keeps belief in capitalist system and considers himself failure
• feels paralyzed in the end, sitting by the window “as though transfixed between the living and the dead”
Summary and Conclusion

• John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death* explores concept of liminality at multiple levels

• The novel’s protagonist undergoes individual and collective forms of liminality
  – from Hungarian to Canadian (ethnic liminality)
  – from boyhood to man-/fatherhood (sexual liminality)
  – from working-class to middle-class (social liminality)
  – from urban periphery to city centre (spatial liminality)
  – from pre-war to post-/interwar period (temporal liminality)

• As Sandor Hunyadi experiences separation but no incorporation, he remains in transition, i.e. in permanent liminality
Thank you for your attention!

STOP sign at intersection of Portage Avenue and Main Street, Winnipeg, c. 1927

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