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Reverse Potential of Liminality in *Hotel du Lac* by Anita Brookner

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is the analysis of the liminal phase of Edith Hope, the protagonist of Anita Brookner's novel *Hotel du Lac*. Moreover, the study is an attempt to investigate the results of liminality in the late twentieth century society, which still imposed the pressure of getting married on a middle-aged woman. Edith, placed in the liminal space characterised by humility, seclusion and sexual continence of a subject, is able to defy social expectations. This becomes possible mostly through the act of writing. Recording her thoughts in the form of letters serves the creative function of constructing her individuality which turns out to be the foundation of her new status.

KEYWORDS

liminality, auto-creation, rite of passage, Anita Brookner, Arnold van Gennep

Anita Brookner's contribution to literature is a moot point. Researchers like John Skinner,¹ Rajni Walia² or Eileen Williams-Wanquet³ praise Brookner's novels for their intellectual and psychological depth, while others like Anthony Burgess,⁴

¹ J. Skinner, *The Fictions of Anita Brookner: Illusions of Romance*, London 1992.

² R. Walia, *Women and Self: Fictions of Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner*, New Delhi 2001.

³ E. Williams-Wanquet, *Art and Life in Novels of Anita Brookner: Reading for Life, Subversive Re-reading for Life*, Bern 2004.

⁴ J. Skinner, op. cit., p. 1.

Peter Kemp,⁵ John Ezard⁶ diminish her literature denying its originality. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that *Hotel du Lac*, Brookner's fourth novel, stirred similar controversies, especially after winning Booker Prize. Although one may confine the novel to "[...] an elaborately modulated squeal of 'it's not fair!'"⁷ in the fashion of Francis Wheen, this seemingly simple story is a conspicuous example of the liminal aesthetics and liminoid matters that are so characteristic for many novels of Anita Brookner. These liminal qualities in this prize-winning novel seem to be overlooked by researchers and critics, which results in incomplete interpretation. Analyzing Edith Hope, the protagonist of *Hotel du Lac*, in liminal categories casts a new light not only on her development but also on the theme of the novel. When the assumptions introduced in the key studies in anthropology by Arnold van Gennep⁸ and Victor Turner⁹ are adopted, it becomes possible to understand the progress of Edith Hope which allows to comprehend *Hotel du Lac* not only as a "study in melancholy," as Sam Jordison¹⁰ summaries it, but also as a study in liminality.

Van Gennep in his pivotal work *The Rites of Passage* from 1909, classified and described the process of rituals focusing on the initiation ceremonies. He stated that the rites of passage can be divided into three phases: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal. The liminal phase is characterised by the loss of the previous status and the lack of the future one. Its function is to dissociate a subject from the former state and prepare to acquire a new position in society.¹¹ Later, Turner further explored the issue of liminality. In his book *The Ritual Process*, he describes the attributes of liminal subjects.¹² One of the mentioned qualities is related to obedience and withdrawal into docile silence. Turner argues that in tribal societies the purpose of words is not just communication: "The wisdom (*mana*) that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte."¹³ Thus, it may be inferred that language should be used with prudence because it carries "power and wisdom."¹⁴ The humiliations then perform the double function. On the

⁵ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁶ J. Ezard, *From the Archive, 19 October 1984: Booker Prize Awarded to a 6-1 Outsider*, "The Guardian", [online] <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/oct/19/archive-booker-prize-awarded-1984> [accessed: 9.07.2015].

⁷ F. Wheen, *Lord Gnome's Literary Companion*, Verso 1996, p. 159.

⁸ A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago 2011.

⁹ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, New York 1995.

¹⁰ S. Jordison, *Booker Club: Hotel du Lac*, "The Guardian", [online] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/05/booker-club-hotel-du-lac> [accessed: 9.07.2015].

¹¹ A. van Gennep, op. cit., p. 11.

¹² V. Turner, op. cit., pp. 94–130.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 103.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

one hand, they make the liminal entities stronger to handle the duties ascribed to their new position, and on the other, the humiliations strip people to their essence, to the state in which it is easier to acquire the information: "The neophyte in liminality must be *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status."¹⁵

However, before the new status is adopted, resignation from sexual activity is another characteristic feature of liminality. Sexual relationships are the sign of social structure and through sexual continence a person retreats from this structure. As Turner argues: "The undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by the discontinuance of sexual relations and the absence of marked sexual polarity."¹⁶ The lack of polarity implies also the fusion of the opposites as the sacred and the profane. *Communitas*, that is the state of the liminal subjects, is also a mixture of seclusion and companionship.¹⁷ Hence the phrase "betwixt and between" is very frequently used in the relation to liminal position which by its nature is indifferent. Turner, in the attempt to generalize the liminal attributes, also writes that: "[...] liminality is frequently linked to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon."¹⁸

Interestingly, some of the described characteristics of liminality may be traced in the story of Edith, who is a romance writer in her late thirties, yet her private life is devoid of successful romantic relationship. She is being consumed with a love affair with a married man, David, while her friend Penelope, a self-proclaimed matchmaker, leads her to the engagement with stable but insipid Geoffrey. However, having prepared everything for the wedding and reception, Edith refrains from taking part in the wedding ceremony, leaving her friends bewildered by her behaviour. In those circumstances, Penelope decides to send Edith to a remote hotel at the lake near Geneva. According to the Warner's categorization, it may be inferred that Edith is the subject of *life-crisis rite*. Turner describes such rites as "a number of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of society."¹⁹ Citing Warner, Turner mentions birth, puberty, marriage and death as examples of life-crisis rites. In the case of Edith we have to do with a specific distortion of the life-crisis ritual as she didn't actually take part in the already prepared wedding ceremony. Thus, marriage ceremony, the very conspicuous rite in its own, which in the case of Edith and Geoffrey was planned but never realized, resulted in another, proper

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 104.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 60.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 95.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 168.

rite of passage for Edith. It seems that at that certain, critical point of life, women are expected to make a statement about their marital status, so this critical point doesn't necessarily entail becoming husband and wife but rather the decision itself. Following, even if Edith decides not to marry Geoffrey, the quality of the time and events following her renounce are representative for liminal phase. Interestingly, life-crisis rituals are typically assigned by Turner to the category of rituals of status elevation, however, Edith is despised and ostracized by her community. This rejection might be a part of an emerging pattern according to which the typical elements of anthropological categorization are reversed: if a life-crisis ritual brings social recognition, then an *unfulfilled* life-crisis ritual results in repudiation. All is not lost though, because, paradoxically, the liminal phase will present Edith a possibility to avoid the status reversal: "And no doubt after a curative stay in this grey solitude (and I notice that the leaves of the plant are quite immobile) I shall be allowed back, to resume my peaceable existence, and to revert to what I was before."²⁰ The underlined word implies that the protagonist's position could be reversed. Though Edith's status will be saved, she, as every liminal subject, won't emerge from the liminal phase to be the same person.

Resigning from marrying Geoffrey may be treated then as the threshold, the onset of liminal phase for Edith. The following circumstances in which Edith finds herself in are characterized by displacement and this quality of being dislocated is strikingly present on many levels in the novel. For instance, Edith writes in the letter to David about her feelings towards the Heathrow airport: "I should not be here! I am out of place!"²¹ What follows is a description of such an anonymous place as an airport which is characterized by chaos and collective transience: "Milling crowds, children crying, everyone intent on being somewhere else."²² The displacement is expressed even more straightforwardly in the following words: "But it was home, or, rather, 'home', which had become inimical all at once."²³ Home, which is conventionally associated with security, protection and comfort, transforms into a hostile place when she becomes a subject of a social scandal. Consequently, Edith is displaced in the model of the world which seems reversed, as a remote hotel is to be more of a shelter than her own house. That is why the word home is surrounded by inverted commas when repeated, as it ceased to be everything that usually home represents for its dweller. Moreover, on the narrative level Edith's contemplations in the Swiss hotel are interrupted by her flashbacks from childhood and the bits and pieces of the events which preceded her "curative stay." Thus the story in its chronological order is

²⁰ A. Brookner, *Hotel du Lac*, London 1993, p. 9. All the emphasis in the article belong to the author.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

constructed by the reader only towards the final of the novel which also adds to the feeling of displacement.

What is more, the displacement is further emphasized by fog which seems ever-lingering. The frequent mentioning of this atmospheric condition makes the hotel appear as if sailing in the universe, isolated and surreal. Fog is often the reason why shapes and people are indiscernible. Also the view from the window is indistinguishable, which is remarkably mentioned in the opening sentence of the novel: "From the window all that could be seen was a receding area of grey."²⁴ The absence of the charming landscape may function as a symbol of the lack of certainty about the prospect of the future. The protagonist is kept on hold in the liminal phase which prevents any premature actions but such a state comes with the cost of uncertainty. Edith is left only with speculations about her future, she doesn't know what waits ahead but she is aware of the life scenarios prepared by her society and culture. Similarly, she speculates about the landscape under the fog:

It was to be supposed that beyond the grey garden, which seemed to sprout nothing but the stiffish leaves of some unfamiliar plant, lay the vast grey lake, spreading like an anaesthetic towards the invisible further shore, and beyond that, in imagination only, yet verified by the brochure, the peak of the Dent d'Oche, on which snow might already be slightly and silently falling.²⁵

Thus, the protagonist is not able to examine the surroundings of her new residency herself. This indicates that, at least for a time being, Edith loses contact with the stable, empirically proven course of events. Using the brochure to know what is located in front of her resembles the uncertainty of the future. Similarly, the aftermath of resigning to marry Geoffrey is so close as the view from her window. However, she cannot guess what exactly the repercussions will be, as she cannot pierce through the fog, she may only infer the nature of the consequences. Such deductions are possible thanks to the socially transmitted models of behaviour, organization of social life or snapshot images popularized by the media. They usually present the superficial or idealized models of reality just as a brochure constitutes a simulacrum of a view that is so close to Edith but for the moment unattainable. Moreover, the vision is blurred not only when Edith is in the hotel looking at the window view but also when she visits the restaurant with another hotel guest, Monica ("They [Edith and Monica] brooded in the smoky atmosphere"²⁶), or during the trip Edith takes with Mr Neville. The atmospheric conditions are most misleading during the above mentioned trip, holding the contrasting qualities characteristic for liminality. Deceptively, at some point

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 7.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 145.

there seems to be clarity: "At this height the lake mists were no longer imaginable: half-tones and ambiguous gradation, gentle appreciations of mildness and warmth, were banished, relegated to invalid status, by the uncompromising clarity of this higher air."²⁷ The quote may signify that the altitude gives new, clear and stable perspective, which was not possible on the hotel level; as if finally the view was more stern ("uncompromising") and comforting ("clarity") at the same time. However, the place is still described with various, contrasting, excluding features:

Up here the weather was both hot and cold, bright and dark: hot in the sun, cold in the shade, bright as they climbed, and dark as they had sat in the small deserted café-bar [...] they reached the top of what seemed to Edith to be a mountain, although the golden fruit on the trees in the terraced orchards they had passed on their way rather gave the lie to this assumption.²⁸

Accordingly, even if the view from the perspective of the mountain is clear, describing the location as stable would pose a difficulty. The view may *look* solid but it *is not* because every quality that is assigned to it is immediately contrasted with an opposing one which seems as true as the previous characteristic. Then the word "lie" in this fragment does not seem to be only a part of a longer phrase (i.e. "to give a lie to an assumption") but also an emphatic summary of the illusionary stability. It is even more plausible if the whole context of the trip is taken into consideration. During this outing Mr. Neville offers Edith a marriage without emotional involvement merely for the sake of social stability. Then, the word "lie" even if used in relation to natural phenomena seems to function here as an understatement revealing the trap which Mr. Neville's proposition constitutes. Thus, even clarity in *Hotel du Lac* is as misleading as ever-lingering fog.

While discussing "grey fog" in *Hotel du Lac* it is worth mentioning that Turner in *The Ritual Process* associated liminality, among other features, with darkness.²⁹ It seems that van Gennep in *The Rite of Passage* and later Turner in the book *The Ritual Process* describe liminality as the phase constituting of elements from both - preceding and following states. If we apply the symbolic analogy and identify the states before and after liminality as contrasting positions, then, consequently, liminality should be associated with greyness which comes as a result of mixing two most opposing colours, i.e. black and white. Indeed, this is the shade most frequently used in *Hotel du Lac* (i.e. "grey garden," "grey lake," "grey solitude," "greyish couple," "grey day," "men in grey suits" etc.). The word "grey" is used more than thirty times within the novel of one hundred eighty-four pages.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 90.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ V. Turner, op. cit., p. 95.

The grey fog contributes to the impression that the world presented is dormant, still, motionless as in the already quoted sentence: "And no doubt after a curative stay in this grey solitude (and I notice that the leaves of the plant are quite *i m m o b i l e*) [...]."³⁰ Such a description of Edith's immediate environment seems to be functional as it presents also her emotional state. The foggy, lethargic views help to identify the inner landscapes of the protagonist soul.³¹ But this state has a revolutionary potential:

[...] the dense cloud that descended for days at a time and then vanished without warning to reveal a new landscape, full of colour and incident: boats skimming on the lake, passengers at the landing stage, an open air market, the outline of the gaunt remains of a thirteenth-century castle, seams of white on the far mountains, and on the cheerful uplands to the south a rising backdrop of apple trees, the fruit sparkling with emblematic significance. For this was a land of prudently harvested plenty, a land which had conquered human accidents, leaving only the weather distressingly beyond control.³²

Moreover, the quote not only subtly hints at the foreseen changes but also implies that the weather descriptions are very purposeful here, they symbolise something uncontrollable and very powerful as the cycle of nature. Edith, being a subject of life-crisis rite, is undergoing changes similar to those which are characteristic to the natural cycles of the seasons. The liminal state is just a phase before the next one. It is a preparatory stage for the next one, more abundant and diverse as the underlined phrases indicate. Edith's transformation then corresponds to the passage of winter into spring. Consequently, the phrase "distressingly beyond control" shows that under the motionless, hibernated surface there is a subversive capacity, described by Turner as "fundamental for culture itself. For through acts turning the world upside down the very possibility of openness and change emerges [...]."³³

Nevertheless, before any change happens to Edith, she finds herself dislocated not only as far as space dimension is considered, but also in the temporal sense. Hotel du Lac is "deserted;" there are frequent mentions of the desolation of the resort with its specific, nostalgic, out of season ambience. Throughout the novel there are hints suggesting the state of being frozen in time, which is accentuated e.g. by the lack of motion ("the leaves of the plant are quite *i m m o b i l e*"³⁴) or the sense that no action is possible: "[...] the enclosed world of the hotel, with

³⁰ A. Brookner, op. cit., p. 9.

³¹ Such a presentation of the character resembles the correspondence of natural phenomena and the emotional state in Romantic fiction.

³² A. Brookner, op. cit., pp. 7–8.

³³ V. Turner, op. cit., p. x.

³⁴ A. Brookner, op. cit., p. 9.

its smells of food and scent, its notice taken of favours granted or withdrawn, its long memories, and its sharp eyes, and its contractual arrangements to behave agreeably and as if nothing untoward could ever happen.”³⁵ This fragment also attests to the particularity of the subtle rules within the hotel which constitutes the separate universe. *Hotel du Lac* as limen is governed by different principles than the reality outside it and each small gesture, utterance, behaviour between the hotel guests is meaningful if not symbolic. The visitors do not form a group of random characters. Thus, Edith ponders upon the women she meets, as they function as models of femininity. The protagonist uses them to re-examine her attitude towards her relationships as well as her principles derived from literature. Thus she encounters Mrs and Ms Puseys – extravagant mother and daughter bound with a strange relationship, attention-seeking women, absorbed with daily pleasures; Monica – a disillusioned young wife, trapped in her addictive world; and Madame Bonneuil – an old, deaf lady, abandoned by her son and left in the hotel with a dog. Edith also reflects upon her friend Penelope in London – a ruthless flirt. However, Edith’s reflections are limited to her inner contemplations and letters to David. In her book *Women and Self*, Walia writes that the women “[...] serve as the outward manifestation of her [Edith] inner discussion about the lifestyle, attitude and mindset on a female self in contemporary world.”³⁶ She maintains a low profile serving as a perfectly accepting company for guests who fight for authority within the hotel hierarchy. According to Turner, such passivity and humility is typical for liminal subjects.³⁷ It is a part of the process of shedding the attributes assigned to the previous status – becoming as neutral as possible and thus ready to acquire the new position. This applies also to Edith’s sexual continence. In Edith’s scrutiny of the model of romantic relationship sexual sphere is not discussed openly. For example, in the reminiscences of the moments spent with David, food often functions as a symbol of bodily communion (which is notabene a frequent motif in other Brookner’s novels). What is more, during Edith’s stay in the hotel, she is portrayed as a completely asexual being. When her values are put to the trial and Mr Neville offers her marriage as a plainly practical arrangement, his proposal excludes any potential intimate intercourse.

Edith’s continence accentuates also the characteristic blend for liminality – the sense of being simultaneously with others, yet being apart. Her taciturn disposition also functions as a buffer which doesn’t allow to merge with others before she re-evaluates her own fundamental truths. Actually, her numerous deliberations are recorded only in the letters to David. Curiously, at the end of the story it turns out that communication was not the goal of her letter writing

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 143.

³⁶ R. Walia, op. cit., p. 162.

³⁷ V. Turner, op. cit., p. 103.

because she never sends the letters. Instead, the correspondence plays an ontological function similar to the spells, incantations and ritual chants during the rites of passage in indigenous communities. Therefore, Edith's letters weren't merely the way of describing the reality but the form of creating her new reality and her own voice. This turns to be instrumental in the process of the personal development which is asserted by Walia: "Through some of the protagonists in their fiction, these women [Rhys, Pym, Brookner] writers resist the marginalisation of the women they create, by allowing them the freedom to discover their own views about the world and their selves and by drawing out their point of view."³⁸ A similar process takes place in *Hotel du Lac*, where the aim of Edith's "curative stay" was to become "properly apologetic," i.e. even more submissive and ready to comply with contemporary standards of womanhood. However, this target is not reached, which goes in line with Turner, who claims that the extra-ordinary potential of liminality, even though it is painful and intimidating, lurks in its unexpected results and the subversive quality.³⁹ Such an unpredictable outcome of Edith's liminal stay in Swiss resort is her newly acquired awareness that the benefits of stability, protection and social status are not worth its cost. Regarding the issue of stability, *Hotel du Lac* forms a narrative frame because at the end of the novel Edith refers to the idea of home which is mentioned at the beginning. She writes a telegram: "Coming home"⁴⁰ but after a while she crosses the word "home" and leaves the last (for both the novel and the telegram) word: "Returning."⁴¹ Although we know from the initial pages that the protagonist longs for a stable place, roots and status, the resigning from those in the final message attests to her incredible maturity. Edith's life-crisis passage harbours her to the new disillusioning openness to the future. She is prepared to a conscious return to London even if she realizes that the contemporary world she lives in, with its models of relationships, does not constitute her home understood as a collection of her principles and truths. Walia claims that Edith "[...] learns to free herself from false expectations by seeing through the distortions of reality in some consoling myths that surround the idea of love."⁴² Edith's courage to continue life in London with new and less comforting view of life attests that Walia's conclusion is right.

³⁸ R. Walia, op. cit., p. 185.

³⁹ V. Turner, op. cit., p. x.

⁴⁰ A. Brookner, op. cit., p. 184.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² R. Walia, op. cit., p. 184. In fact, the merging of the dramatic and comic qualities is another specific attribute of liminality. The exquisite irony and subtle sense of humour in *Hotel du Lac* help to trust that Edith's prospects are not so gloomy. The perception of the critical hiatus in the protagonist's life is eased by the irony as when Edith recognizes herself in the reflection in the pain at the airport: "For a moment I panicked, for I am myself now" (A. Brookner, op. cit., p. 10).

Indeed, Edith is disillusioned with the patterns of romantic relationships but also with the idea of social status. The submissiveness of the hotel residents and staff towards the Puseys shows Edith how superficial are the categories which determine the social deference paid to those regarded higher in the social structure. The liminoid phase of Edith obviously does not lead her to the traditional pattern of rites which escorts an unmarried girl to become a married woman. What is more important is the fact that towards the end of her stay in the hotel it seems that Edith does not strive for any kind of stability granted by social approval and status. Having witnessed the shallowness of both, collective respect and the idea of marriage, Edith's ritual process takes an unpredictable turn. Conventionally, after the liminal phase the subject proceeds to a different, higher status. It might be interpreted that Edith, having observed the conditions of marriage, takes a conscious decision not to get married out of convention. Thus, she does not progress to the postliminal phase. What takes place in *Hotel du Lac* is atypical for the standardized classification of the phases of rite of passage. Edith returns to her previous phase instead of advancing to the position of a spouse. In this way she resigns from a social stability and acceptance. Although in spatial terms she goes back to where she lives on daily basis, on psychological level her return is more of a conscious choice. Edith becomes mature enough not to comply to the rules of others. Therefore, even though she goes again to London as a still single, middle-aged romance writer, she gives herself a new status. The uniqueness of this new position is defined by personal autonomy. It is as though the rite of passage in the twentieth century gives more choice to a subject than the ritual process in the societies described by van Gennep over a hundred years ago. Although in contemporary times the public pressure is still strong, there are options for a reverse personal development against the popular demands of society. Thus, the liminal phase which originally derives from a very rigid process imposed on every member of community, nowadays brings forward a chance to stand in opposition to those restrictive conventions. Edith progresses because she becomes to define herself through her *individuality*. The key instruments to find it out are taciturn observations of social structures and the letters that she writes. Both are conditioned by extraordinary circumstances of liminal space. However, the latter is a matter of auto-creation in which the individuality and autonomy are given a voice. It might be also understood as a commentary to the creative potential hidden in the act of writing as liminal phenomenon. Consequently, literature may be understood as using words to create the reality. Such a role of language is one of the most important attributes of liminal phase of the rites described by van Gennep and Turner. Thus, Edith's final telegram as the emphatic case of ontological writing ultimately convinces that liminal characteristics of the world model in *Hotel du Lac* are too conspicuous to be omitted while analyzing the novel. Interestingly enough, a telegram as an alternative to tribal chanting corresponds to the contemporary variation of the original model of the rite of passage. Within

the frames of this modified rite, the subject is able to defy the imposed limits and start a new stage of life even if, paradoxically, the liminal stage is a result of resigning from a ceremony.

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