TRANSITIONS SEMINAR NEWSLETTER 20

Bimonthly, edited by M. Aguirre

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The *Transitions Seminar* is a permanent initiative set up in 2019 by the LIMEN Research Group. It convenes approximately on a bi-monthly basis, online since 2020. It provides a forum for debate on liminality and related issues, and a research-training ground for PhD candidates, as well as functioning as a venue for the current *Transitions Project*. It is linked to The Gateway Press and the websites *LIMEN & TEXT*, *The Northanger Library*, and *The Janus Gate Project*.

http://www.limenandtext.com/rst.html
http://www.limenandtext.com/index.html
https://northangerlibrary.com/
http://janusgateliterature.com/

CONTENTS

1. Forthcoming events
2. Notes
3. Publications relevant to Liminality Studies

1. FORTHCOMING EVENTS

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NEGOTIATING THE THRESHOLD

The LIMEN Group is pleased to announce that the

Ninth International Seminar on Liminality and Text,

organised by Belén Piqueras and Manuel Aguirre,

will be held at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

on 13-14 November, 2025.

> In the mercurial field shaped by narrative texts, goals are not assured; a transition may or not reach closure but will always consist in an engagement with the limen. During the course of this engagement, certain changes may take place. What occurs on the threshold is therefore no simple crossover but a veritable *negotiation.*

Further information is available in the enclosed circular. We are happy to report that Professors Hein Viljoen (South-Africa), Ana Manzanas (Salamanca) and Ineke Jolink (Paris) have already confirmed their participation as keynote speakers.

On other news, no talks are scheduled in the Transitions Seminar for the month of May, but any further activities between now and August will be communicated by e-mail or in our July TS Newsletter.

2. NOTES

This section is open to notes from readers, and contributions are welcome. They should not exceed by much the 1000-word limit.

Liminality and the Multiform

M. Aguirre

A folktale *type* is a collection of performances (whether or not recorded in writing, on tape or on film) of what is recognised to be the same tale.[1] Since each performance is by definition different from every other one, the type actually consists in an open-ended set of versions none of which can be considered the 'original,' the 'definitive' or the 'true' form of the tale.

Much the same happens with ballads. According to George L. Kittredge, the popular ballad 'can have no fixed and final form, no sole authentic version. There are *texts*, but there is no *text*.'[2] As Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones put it almost a century later,

> [t]he title 'Babylon' or 'Naomi Wise' then, does not merely identify a song sung at one time and place by one individual to one particular audience. It is also the designator of a *type set*, the members of which can all be conceptualised as *versions* of the same *ballad type* because all tell what one can conceive to be the same story, and all do so in what one can judge to be essentially the same way.[3]

Claude Lévi-Strauss made a similar point for myth when he appraised Freud's comments on the Oedipus complex as an integral part of the overall myth of Oedipus: *il n'existe pas de version 'vraie,'* he wrote: all versions belong to the myth.[4]

No other is the situation with traditional oral epic, according to Albert B. Lord:

> We find it difficult to grasp anything that is multiform. It seems to us necessary to construct an ideal text or seek an original, and we remain dissatisfied with an ever-changing phenomenon. I believe that once we know the facts of oral composition we must cease trying to find an original of any traditional song […] Each performance is the specific song, and at the same time it is the generic song. The song we are listening to is 'the song.'[5]

The multiform is not to be equated with the prototype or the archetype. The latter two are, respectively, the prime example and the ideal form abstracted from a set of versions. The multiform is neither; it is the set itself, 'a related population of cultural entities,' writes Michael Drout, 'that are recognized as being fundamentally "the same"

[1] See Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* [1946] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 414.

[2] George Lyman Kittredge, Introduction to Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. [1882-98] (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), xvii-xviii.

[3] Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *Folkloristics: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 112.

[4] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 2000), vol. I, 251.

[5] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 100-1.

by the categorization systems of the human mind.'[6] Such an object, shaped by different versions of itself all of which are 'the same' object, exhibits liminality as its fundamental property: it straddles itself, so to speak.

Nor is canonised literature exempt from multiformity, witness Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Doctor Faustus*, which has come down to us in two rather different versions, the A- and B- texts. More generally, the phenomenon of *rewriting*—reviews, translations, new editions, digests, criticism, performance, etc.—entails the coexistence of the literary text with other versions of itself.[7] Multiformity is then a trait of much folklore and literature; and should it be argued that, in the face of a multiform ballad, *one* version ought to prevail, we would be arguing from desire, rather than from the evidence at hand.

It would be an error, however, to suppose that at the heart of the multiform there must lie some irreducible common trait shared by all its versions (and behind this assumption we discern yet another effort to distil *the* single form). A feature found in a number of versions may be missing in others, and similarity itself is dependent on different traits found scattered among different versions. The key adjective here is *polythetic*, as found in the 1982 *Supplement* to the *OED*:

> **Polythetic** (adjective): 'Sharing a number common characteristics, without any one of these being essential for membership of the group or class in question.'

This comes close to the Wittgensteinian notion of 'family resemblance':

> the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross […].[8]

Just as a group of siblings will resemble their parents in part and variously, with no single feature being necessarily found in every one of them, so no version of the textual multiform will exhibit all the 'basic' traits, as will be amply confirmed by perusal of Warren Roberts' monumental study of hundreds of versions of one single tale type, or of the vast mass of French tale types and variants collected by Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze.[9]

The multiform exemplifies the in-between, an object that exists simultaneously in a number of forms. It is not stable, but this is the natural condition of many—perhaps all—cultural products. If one thinks of the limen as an *inflected* construct, multiformity is a straightforward manifestation of inflexion.

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[6] Michael D. C. Drout, 'Variation within Limits: An Evolutionary Approach to the Structure and Dynamics of the Multiform,' in *Oral Tradition* 26:2 (2011), 447-474, p. 467.

[7] See André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd English edition [1953] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), §67.

[9] See Warren E. Roberts, *The Tale of the Kind and the Unkind Girls: AA-TH 480 and related Titles* [1958] (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); Paul Delarue & Marie-Louise Tenèze, *Le conte populaire français. Catalogue raisonné des versions de France*, 4 vols. [1957-85] (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997, in 1 volume).

3. PUBLICATIONS RELEVANT TO LIMINALITY STUDIES

- **Merle A. Williams**, ed. *Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgressions, North and South* (New York: Routledge, 2020). ISBN: 978-1-003-11243-3 (e-book).
- **Hazel Andrews & Les Roberts**, eds., *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-between* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- **Jessica Darveau & Mustapha Cheikh-Ammar**, 'The Interplay between Liminality and Consumption: A Systematic Literature Review with a Future Research Agenda,' in *International Journal for Consumer Studies*, 45 (March 2021), 867-888, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12678 ('During the last three decades, the concept of liminality has been used by consumer researchers to examine consumption-related phenomena associated with ambiguous transitions and meaningful transformative events…').
- **Brady Wagoner & Tania Zittoun**, eds., *Experience on the Edge: Theorizing Liminality* (Cham: Springer, 2022). ('Focuses on theorizing and applying the concept of liminality within psychology. Provides diverse case studies from around the world to illustrate liminality in action…').
- **Jeremy DeAngelo**, *Outlawry, Liminality, and Sanctity in the Literature of the Early Medieval North Atlantic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

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