



## TRANSITIONS SEMINAR NEWSLETTER 13

March 2024

Bimonthly, edited by M. Aguirre

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://janusgate literature.com/>

### 1. LIMEN & TEXT

The following results of the *Transitions Project* are now available (with thanks to our webmaster, Ina Böttger)

#### A) TRELLIS Papers

Nº 14 **Verónica Frejo Marañón** (2023)

'Bloodborne: System Dominants, Liminality, and the Lure of Resistance in Video Games'

<http://www.limenandtext.com/pdf/Trellis%2014%20-%20Ver%C3%B3nica%20Frejo%20-%20Bloodborne.pdf>

Nº 15 **Simon Pritchard** (2024)

'Liminal Ethics - The Doctrine of the Middle Way in Don Delillo's *Zero K*'

<http://www.limenandtext.com/pdf/Trellis%2015%20-%20PRITCHARD.pdf>

Nº 16 **Manuel Aguirre** (2024)

'Modelling the Limen'

[http://www.limenandtext.com/pdf/Trellis\\_16\\_-\\_Manuel\\_Aguirre\\_-\\_Modelling\\_the\\_Limen.pdf](http://www.limenandtext.com/pdf/Trellis_16_-_Manuel_Aguirre_-_Modelling_the_Limen.pdf)

#### B) The TS Newsletter

<http://www.limenandtext.com/1%20transition%20project%20ts%20newsletter.html>

Issues 10 through 12

#### C) ONLINE SEMINAR VIDEOS

[http://www.limenandtext.com/rst\\_online%20videos.html](http://www.limenandtext.com/rst_online%20videos.html)

- 'Modelling the Limen' (M. Aguirre, December 2023)
- 'Critical Role: Embodied Liminality in Role-Playing Games' (V. Frejo, February 2024)

#### D) OTHERS

M. Aguirre, 'Gothic Drift: The Case of "Raymond" and "Arthur Kavanagh"', in *Gothic Studies* 26:1 (March 2024), pp. 34-51.

## 2. FORTHCOMING EVENT

It has proven impractical to organise a talk for the month of April, but the following is scheduled for May:

**Beatriz Sánchez Santos**

will speak on

### **“The Mathematics Inhabiting the Limen”**

**on Tuesday, May 7<sup>th</sup>  
at 10.15 a.m. (CET),  
via Teams**

#### **ABSTRACT**

Throughout the years, our conceptualizations and descriptions of the limen have made use of countless analogies that derive from mathematical concepts: from Manuel Aguirre's anisotropic spaces in Gothic Fiction and the surficial in Fantasy literature to Robert Samuels's music as narrative limit, or my own definition of characterization in Gothic fiction as a strange attractor in a non-linear dynamic system.

Despite the many difficulties that arise from an interdisciplinary approach to literary analysis, I cannot but fully endorse Katherine Hayles's view that "One way to understand the connection between literature and science is to see science as a repository of tropes that can be used to illuminate literary texts."<sup>1</sup> In this talk, I will present some ways in which mathematical models can help us "illuminate" the limen in literature. First, by providing a wide-ranging overview of some branches of Mathematics that have been used or could be used to describe different liminal phenomena in literature: Logic, Geometry, Topology, and chaos theory. I will then offer an analysis of the embedded narrative in Ursula K. Le Guin's story *Semley's Necklace*, in which I argue that the different ontological and discursive planes in the two narratives give rise to a problematic case of metalepsis. It is my intention to provide a topological model that accounts for, and allows us to visualize, this phenomenon: the Klein surface.

From this overview, several questions will arise, the most important being: what could be the advantages of using mathematical modelling versus a simple visual metaphor? Is it possible to go beyond mere analogy, even? How can we grapple with the complexity of the relation between science and literature at a point where science can/does inform literary production itself? I hope that either during the talk or during its discussion we will reach a deeper understanding of these questions.

(The talk will last some 60 minutes. A Teams link will be provided at a later stage).

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<sup>1</sup> Hayles, Katherine (1991) *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p.20.

### 3. NOTES, QUERIES, RESPONSES

#### THE LIMEN AS CHRONOTOPE

Manuel Aguirre

We speak spatially of ‘the limen,’ temporally of ‘the liminal stage.’ The two terms are, in fact, inseparable; site and event are one. It was some such insight that prompted Alwyn Rees and Victor Turner to describe the limen as ‘a place that is not a place and a time that is not a time.’<sup>2</sup> Because in narrative this corresponds to what Mikhail Bakhtin called the *chronotope of the threshold*, we need to examine the equivalence between limen and chronotope.<sup>3</sup>

A pivotal narrative category, the chronotope fuses the settings of space and time and provides ‘the organising centr[e] for the fundamental narrative events of the novel.’<sup>4</sup> Each literary genre is characterised by its own distinctive chronotope. A good illustration is found in the spacetime configuration of the ‘alien world in adventure-time’ typical of the Greek romance genre.<sup>5</sup> Here, between the moment of the first meeting of hero and heroine, with its instant flareup of love, and that of their predictable union in marriage, nothing need occur because their love, though endlessly tested, does not change in the least:

it is as if absolutely nothing had happened between these two moments, as if their marriage had been consummated on the day after their meeting [...]. The gap, the pause, the hiatus that appears between these two strictly adjacent biographical moments and in which, as it were, the entire novel is constructed is not contained in the biographical time-sequence [...]. It is, precisely, an extratemporal hiatus between two moments of biographical time (Bakhtin 1938: 89-90).

The gap in question is our limen, and it makes much sense to assume that everything taking place in that ‘extratemporal hiatus’ is a liminal spacetime interval. In a conclusion written in 1973, Bakhtin identified several minor types of chronotope, among them (without assigning it to a particular genre) the *chronotope of the threshold*—the specific spatiotemporal environment that obtains in liminal areas. This chronotope is associated with, e.g., Dostoevsky’s staircases, corridors and streets, and is

connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold) [...] In this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time (ib.: 248).

It is hard to see the difference between the threshold chronotope and that of the adventure romance. In both, an ‘extratemporal hiatus’ arises between biographical time segments. In the first, though much happens, nothing really changes; in the second, a decisive change takes place (or fails to do so) in no time at all. In both, then, time has no biographical reality. This

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1974), 239.

<sup>3</sup> This note was partly inspired by a lively discussion over several sessions of the TS Workshop in the Spring of 2023. My thanks to Trevor Westmoreland who initiated the debate.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 1937-38. *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics*, in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258, p. 250.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin 1937-38: 89.

elasticity of time (and space) is a distinctive mark of limina.<sup>6</sup> The term 'threshold' suits both types equally well, and invites three caveats.

First, it is almost inevitable to extend the concept of the threshold chronotope to cover a large variety of genres and texts (how many narratives do *not* take place on or across the threshold of adventure, how many do *not* hinge on one or more crises?). Second, Bakhtin's understanding of thresholds is not supple enough if it only contemplates a 'moment,' the 'instantaneous,' for already Van Gennep was aware that, precisely because of their mercurial quality, thresholds can 'expand' (and 'contract').<sup>7</sup> Third, the notion of crisis loses efficacy in such case: no 'crisis' in Bakhtin's sense can be said to take place in the Greek romance—unless we claim that the romance tells of one continuous, extended crisis (which defeats Bakhtin's sense).

The disjunction may well be due to the thirty-five years elapsed between the publication of Bakhtin's monograph and the writing of the conclusion. In the interim, the Russian scholar may have developed new objectives or re-thought some of his premises. I propose that one way to retain the insight and avoid the inconsistency is to assume that what occurs on the limen is in all cases an event in-between stable states, a *transition* which, in specific instances, may adopt the form of a *crisis*. We may then reserve the term 'crisis' for specific turning-points characterised by an emotional intensity associated with uncertainty, urgency and danger (as specified by the *OED* on 'crisis').

There is then a case for using the expression 'threshold chronotope' *regardless of genre* to designate the specific spatiotemporal configuration that prevails in liminal areas. Space in them is dynamic, hence ambiguous and mercurial; not being subject to the laws of ordinary space and perspective, it can 'stretch' and 'contract.' Time is likewise unstable and disports variable duration and speed. This chronotope may be found at work in the Greek romance (seen as one extended threshold narrative in-between first meeting and marriage); and in Dostoevsky's staircases and corridors, locations 'where crisis events occur, the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decisions that determine the whole life of a man' (Bakhtin 1973: 248).

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<sup>6</sup> See my 'Geometries of Terror: Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror and Science-Fiction,' in *Gothic Studies* 10:2 (2008), pp. 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (1909; Paris: Plon, 1991), 25-26.

## A PROPOS OF THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'TRANSITION'

Beatriz Sánchez

(see *TS Newsletter* nº 12)

*Etymonline* further analyses the root *trans-* as from the PIE *\*-tere-*, in its second sense meaning 'cross over, pass through, overcome' ([https://www.etymonline.com/word/\\*tere-#etymonline\\_v\\_52786](https://www.etymonline.com/word/*tere-#etymonline_v_52786)). I say this because, as I was reading, I was thinking that the *trans-* itself in 'transition' surely is at the heart of this 'through' meaning.

I'm not an expert in etymology by any means, but I find it interesting that the PIE roots are validated by the words they spawn; it's a very 'archaeological' approach, and kind of circular: it is the source of some words, and these words at the same time procure evidence of its existence. *Etymonline* indicates:

It is the hypothetical source of/evidence for its existence is provided by: Sanskrit *tirah*, Avestan *taro* 'through, beyond'; Latin *trans* 'beyond'; Old Irish *tre*, Welsh *tra* 'through'; Old English *þurh* 'through.'

I would point to the Latin and Old English as the main sources of subsequent meanings in English.

[As regards English equivalents of Latin *transire* such as 'cross,' 'pass,' 'traverse,' 'go beyond':] the only one that, to me, does not accommodate so well to this analysis is 'beyond,' because it focuses at the same time on the 'site through,' while positioning the action on the arrival/ result. When I visualize beyond, the 'site through' is already behind. This is something that was curiously confirmed by the PIE *tere-* search, which yielded the result 'cross over, pass through, overcome' (my emphasis). That last one is to me as ambivalent as 'beyond,' in that it focuses on the 'site through' while implying a place of arrival or result.

I feel like this is too nit-picky, perhaps. It's just that 'through' and 'beyond' do not seem to have exactly the same focus, there is a nuance there that perhaps transpires to 'transition.'

The most modern use of 'transition' I can think of at the moment is the transgender experience of gender reassignment, in which the expression 'S/He has transitioned' means the process of change is complete. This is the sense of 'overcome' prevailing, I believe. However, just a description of someone as 'trans' or 'transgender' does not presuppose a complete transition, as the past participle does.

Just a nuance: 'beyond' and 'over' do not seem to focus on a result or destination but on the site that is the focal point of *trans-*, the middle itself. In saying 'go over' or 'beyond' we look, as it were, down or back at the threshold we have just left behind. One can transcend a middle line without necessarily reaching, or even contemplating, an end point. 'Lindbergh flew over the Atlantic' provides neither direction nor outcome, and we must rely on context to determine either. True, an entailment is often assumed, but we need to distinguish between proposition and implication. It may well be that in Modern English the implicative sense of 'transition,' fly over' or 'go beyond' has gained ground (The Editor).

## 4. PUBLICATIONS IN THE FIELD OF LIMINALITY STUDIES

- **Chronotopic Cartographies** (Lancaster University project, 2017-20):  
<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/chronotopic-cartographies/detail/#:~:text=The%20chronotope%20of%20the%20threshold,%2C%20doorways%2C%20corridors%2C%20staircases.>  
 Contains much on the chronotope of the threshold; useful, too, for Fantasy studies; see their Publications:  
<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/chronotopic-cartographies/publications/>.
- **Sophus Helle**, 'The Chronotope of the Threshold in *Gilgamesh*,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 141:1 (2021), 185-200.  
<https://kileskrift.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/helle-2021-chronotope-of-the-threshold.pdf>
- **Hannu K. Riikonen**, "'In the Gloom of the Hall": Chronotopic Motifs in *Dubliners*,' in *Joyce's Dubliners: Lectures critiques - Critical approaches*, ed. Claudine RAYNAUD. New edition [online] (Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2001) (generated 24 décembre 2023), 117-123, <https://books.openedition.org/pufr/4528?lang=en>
- **Harry Olufunwa** 'Achebe's Spatial Temporalities: Literary Chronotopes in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*,' in *Critical Survey*, 17:3 (2005), 49-65, p. 57:  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Harry-Olufunwa/publication/233636128\\_Achebe's\\_Spatial\\_Temporalities\\_Literary\\_Chronotopes\\_in\\_Things\\_Fall\\_Apart\\_and\\_Arrow\\_of\\_God/links/0c960534da7570e0e3000000/Achebes-Spatial-Temporalities-Literary-Chronotopes-in-Things-Fall-Apart-and-Arrow-of-God.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Harry-Olufunwa/publication/233636128_Achebe's_Spatial_Temporalities_Literary_Chronotopes_in_Things_Fall_Apart_and_Arrow_of_God/links/0c960534da7570e0e3000000/Achebes-Spatial-Temporalities-Literary-Chronotopes-in-Things-Fall-Apart-and-Arrow-of-God.pdf)
- **Leah Feldman**, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2018).
- **Claire Roosien**. Review of Feldman's book, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 54:4 (November 2022), 790-91.
- **Lena Rohrbach**. 'The Chronotopes of *Islendinga saga*: Narrativisations of History in Thirteenth-Century Iceland.' *Scandinavian Studies*, 89:3 (fall 2017), 351+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*,  
<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=anon~b96f2505&id=GALE|A524611038&v=2.1&it=r&sid=googleScholar&asid=3e837fa6>
- **Adam Ramadan**. 'Spatialising the Refugee Camp.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38:1 (January 2013), 65-77. <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00509.>
- **Ville R. Hartonen, Sinikka Pöllänen, Liisa Karlsson, and Pertti Väisänen**. 'A stage of Limbo: A Meta-synthesis of Refugees' Liminality.' *Applied Psychology* 71:3 (2022), 1132-67.  
<https://iaap-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/apps.12349>

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