LIMEN & TEXT

TRANSITIONS SEMINAR NEWSLETTER 16 September 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://janusgateliterature.com/

1. FORTHCOMING EVENT

Just a reminder that **Francisco Fuentes** will speak on

The Re-Imagined Identity of Diasporic Writers:
Coping with a Perpetual Liminality
in *exiledwriters.co.uk*

on Thursday, October 24th,
at 11.00 a.m. (CET),
via Teams.

The talk will last about 30 minutes.
An abstract is available in the *TS Newsletter* nº 15.
Here is the Teams link:

https://urldefense.com/v3/__https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19*3ameeting_MGMwMmFmNzEtZmVjNS00Mzk0LWE2ZDAtNDRmMTg1ODgyY2Jl*40thread.v2/0?context=*7b*22Tid*22*3a*22fc6602ef-8e88-4f1d-a206-e14a3bc19af2*22*2c*22Oid*22*3a*222618df3b-c74a-4e43-9f80-18f47d76e245*22*7d__;JSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUl!!D9dNQwwGXtA!SSv2iMK8qHR2uOhcHFa9OOaY9jlqUpvY1KW5_Y2tmHNxHzAE6qOfBigP3Mtao9Fuq8-qmOoogmouoQ$

2. NOTES, QUERIES, RESPONSES

URSULA K. LE GUIN AND THE CHRONOTOPE OF THE THRESHOLD

Manuel Aguirre

I have elsewhere hypothesised that the limen is *inflected*—it is an unstable site. Not being bound by limits, it morphs; it may emerge, widen, contract, shift, or vanish. It can be crossed, but also entered; it can contain, and exclude; it may liberate, but likewise imprison.[1] In all this, liminality is not primarily an intrinsic property of certain things but a tool for analysis. The researcher does not seek to establish, e.g., that a given character or text *is* liminal, but asks what would be revealed if one were to apply threshold analysis to the character or the text. Here is a brief illustration of how this approach works.

Ursula Le Guin's novel *Planet of Exile* (1966) deals with a culture clash between a colony of two thousand Earth humans ('the Farborns') stranded now for six hundred Earth years on the planet Werel, and the local inhabitants, the Tevaran, humanoid *hilfs* ('Highly Intelligent Life Forms') who lead a nomadic existence but are now rebuilding their Winter City, in preparation for a season of intense cold which, due to the planet's orbit, is bound to last fifteen Earth years. The passage below describes the arrival of a third group, the Gaal, nomadic savages from the frozen North. The narrative point of view is that of Earthman Jakob Agat, who reflects on a pattern change in the Gaal's conduct.

> The northerners […] were assaulting the Winter City. They were not destroying it, however; they were obviously trying to save the granaries from the fire, and the herds, and perhaps the women. […] Perhaps, as reported, they were going to try to garrison the place with a few of their own men. Come Spring the Gaal returning from the south could march from town to town of an Empire.
>
> […] it wasn't like the hilfs, this planning ahead. Hilfs did not consider either time or space in the linear, imperialistic fashion of his own species. Time to them was a lantern lighting a step before, a step behind—the rest was indistinguishable dark. Time was this day, this one day of the immense Year. They had no historical vocabulary; there was merely today and "timepast." They looked ahead only to the next season at most. They did not look down over time but were in it as the lamp in the night, as the heart in the body. And so also with space: space to them was not a surface on which to draw boundaries but a range, a heartland, centered on the self and clan and tribe. Around the Range were areas that brightened as one approached them and dimmed as one departed; the farther, the fainter. But there were no lines, no limits. This planning ahead, this trying to keep hold of a conquered place across both space and time was untypical. It showed—what? An autonomous change in a hilf culture-pattern, or an infection from the old northern colonies and forays of Man?
>
> It would be the first time, Agat thought sardonically, that they ever learned an idea from us. Next we'll be catching their colds. […] (pp. 75-6).

[1] See my 'Reading Liminality,' *The TRELLIS Papers* 10 (2022).

Le Guin is known for constructing meticulous Bakhtinian chronotopes, spacetime settings that in turn shape her plots and determine the nature, culture and conduct of her characters.[2] Here she outlines a contrast between the chronotope of the Farborns and that of the Tevaran. The first is linear, history-centred, technological (but Terrans are losing their skills after six centuries of isolation); the second is attuned to nature, cyclical, ruled by the fifteen-year-long seasons; it generates folklore, but no history.

The existence of both groups is utterly bound up with the climate and its consequences. They know that every Winter the Gaal descend from the North, but this time these barbarians have united into an unstoppable army, and their onslaught catches both Tevaran and Terrans unprepared. My point is that understanding both settings in liminalist terms allows us to formulate the book's central theme with some precision.

Agat's lantern metaphor is eloquent: from the Terran perspective, the hilfs (both Tevaran and Gaal) occupy a mere threshold zone in the immensity of time and space, an utterly narrow physical and cultural environment 'lit' by their group consciousness; being bound by 'no lines, no limits,' this setting may stretch, contract, shift. Though the nomadic Tevaran have learnt to build a (makeshift, temporary) city, they have so far lived *in* the limen, unable to advance, unwilling to assimilate from the Farborns as simple a technology as that of the wheel.

The Farborns do not view themselves as inhabiting such a shifting ground. They are able to look at both light and dark areas from a higher, stable vantage point, to draw boundaries and to transcend them; they enjoy control over geography and history, and the ability to plan ahead; in a word, they have the power to create and occupy a steadfast environment for themselves; the snag is, they fear to do so. Living in exile from Earth, they have entrenched themselves in their own traditions and beliefs, which they dread leaving or which they feel unable to overcome. And they face gradual extinction due to, first, a fast-dropping birth-rate caused by alien planetary conditions; second, the impossibility of interbreeding with the Tevaran; and third, that disturbing development among the northern barbarians.

However, they who were immune to local bacteria are beginning to be liable to infection from, e.g., spear wounds (and Agat's dismissive comment about catching the natives' colds turns out to have predictive value). The Terran doctor refuses to believe this, for to him it would be further evidence of decline; but what he fails to realise is that their very loss of immunity betokens a genetic modification, and this is just what might at last give them the ability to interbreed with the Tevaran. As a result of a sufficiently prolonged cultural contact, immovable positions begin to wobble (even the backward Gaal seem to have developed new war strategies due to cultural 'infection' from Earth colonists).

The Tevaran live in an endless present, the Terrans in an endless exile; now, when major change looms ahead, the two chronotopes begin to interpenetrate, and ipso facto waver on the edge of each other, so that both communities find themselves standing on a threshold previously invisible or non-existent. The novel is about the need for both to reach out, evolve, adapt; in our terms, not simply to *cross* boundaries and cease—as they fear—to be themselves, but to *enter* the limen, that zone of negotiation, as a precondition for a new stability (and we know from a later Le Guin novel, *City of Illusions*, that a successful hybrid race will be the outcome). This brief discussion does not prove that *Planet of Exile* is 'a liminal novel' or 'about liminality,' only that an application of liminalist analysis helps formulate a plausible interpretation.

[2] See my 'The Limen as Chronotope', in *The TS Newsletter* 13 (March 2024), pp. 3-4, http://www.limenandtext.com/pdf/TRANSITIONS%20SEMINAR%20NEWSLETTER%2013%20-%20MARCH%202024%20(1).pdf.

3. PUBLICATIONS IN THE FIELD OF LIMINALITY STUDIES

- **Dag Øistein Endsjø**. 'To Lock Up Eleusis: A Question of Liminal Space,' in *Numen* 47:4 (2016), 351-86 https://doi.org/10.1163/156852700511595

- **Francisco Fuentes-Antrás**. 'Shatila as a Campscape: The Transformation of Bare Lives into "Agent Lives" in *Shatila Stories*,' in *Humanities* 13: 1, 23 (2024), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3390/h13010023

- **Iver B. Neumann**. 'Introduction to the Forum on Liminality,' in *Review of International Studies* 38: 2 (April 2012), 473-79. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000817

- **B. J. Oropeza**. 'Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul's Message to the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality,' in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 22: 75 (2000), 69-86. https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X0002207505

- **Stephen Palmer**. '"Dead but Not Departed Yet": The Exploration of Liminal Space in Jim Crace's *Being Dead* (1999),' in *Mortality*, 17: 1 (2012), 51–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2012.651833

- **Xosé Pereira Boan**. *Por El Umbral de la Memoria: Convergencias Liminares en la Cultura Española Contemporánea*. PhD Dissertation, Tulane University (2017), https://library.search.tulane.edu/discovery/delivery/01TUL_INST:Tulane/12432773810006326

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