THE ***TRELLIS*** ***PAPERS***

12.

TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF TRANSITIONS

Manuel Aguirre

GP

THE GATEWAY PRESS
MADRID
2023

THE TRELLIS PAPERS is a refereed series of articles and monographs edited by the Gateway Press, in association with the LIMEN Research Group. It publishes quality working papers in English dealing with intertextual, interdisciplinary, and historical research. It particularly welcomes papers and monographs centred on the study of liminality and related fields. One of its current goals is the dissemination of certain results emerging from the *Transitions Project* initiated in 2018.

As of 2021, ***THE TRELLIS PAPERS*** is published under a Creative Commons License, and is electronically available at http://www.limenandtext.com/publishing_thetrellispapers.html.

Editors
Manuel Aguirre
Belén Piqueras

Managing Editor
Tareixa García de Polavieja

Editorial Board
Elena Bermejo
Nancy Bredendick
Ineke Jolink
Esteban Pujals
Roberta Quance
Robert K. Shepherd
Isabel Soto

Submissions should be sent electronically to the Editors at manuel.n.aguirre@gmail.com or belen.piqueras@uam.es. All submissions will be reviewed by two readers.

THE TRELLIS PAPERS 12
THE GATEWAY PRESS 2023
Madrid, Spain
ISSN: 1886-8223
Depósito legal: M-31364-2006

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF TRANSITIONS

Manuel Aguirre

Independent scholar

This paper is a revised version of a short talk given before the Transitions Seminar.[1] It arose from a dissatisfaction: there are at present no convincing definitions of either liminality or transition in the textual domain. Liminality in and around texts constitutes a rich and confusing area of study—we face, as Simon Pritchard pointed out in the debate following the talk, a system in constant flux. My best hope to make headway among the protean forms of the limen was to begin by isolating and analysing limited aspects of it. The following typology is part of such an effort; it bears stressing that there is nothing definitive about it.

It is becoming a truism that the recognition of liminality forces us to reconsider our understanding of the domain of literary and textual studies. A first stumbling block in the analysis of liminality in literature, however, lies in the difficulty of obtaining an adequate definition for our term. Each researcher stresses one or more aspects of the liminal—process, in-betweenness, ambiguity, and so on—but it is unclear how these aspects relate to each other. How many 'liminalities' must we reckon with? What do we exclude from the semantic range of this term? Should 'limen' be distinguished from, say, 'border', the liminal from the hybrid, the marginal or the liminoid? *Ad hoc* solutions or equivocal approaches—now letting the term 'liminality' designate one type of phenomenon, now using it to identify several types—are to be avoided. Ockham's razor favours the simplest explanation, and I postulate one single concept susceptible of many variations in different areas and situations, rather than an indeterminate number of concepts mutually incompatible in use.

[1] Online seminar organised by the LIMEN Research Group at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM) session of 19 October 2022. The paper benefited greatly from the debate that followed, and I am grateful to the seminar participants for their feedback; all errors are my own. A video recording of that session is available at http://www.limenandtext.com/rst_online%20videos.html.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Here are some tentative pointers for a definition. 1) The limen is not a space but a coordinate line. 2) This line, however, is most often conceived in spatial (physical or figurative) terms. 3) When so conceived, it exhibits variable extension: it can be a line, a band, a zone, or an entire world.[2] Whatever its width, 4) it is no ordinary space but a storehouse of options. 5) Limina, in turn, can only exist in some spatiotemporal field. For my purposes, I will write of a *textual field*, one within which texts, genres and media interact; contact and exchange between them must therefore be possible. The points, lines or zones of contact—borders, interstices, interfaces, and so forth—are what we designate as limina. In other words, the field does not consist only of texts, genres and media but also of the limina separating and linking these. A theory of the textual field will have to take into account both the objects and the thresholds—physical, temporal, conceptual—that configure it.

This said, thresholds are not codified sections of the field with their own autonomy: they only come into existence as a result of contacts, and this brings out a further trait: 6) they are not independent components of the field, but 'parasitic' on the sites they delimit, connect and separate. They result only from the interactions among these components, and simultaneously they enable interactions. Therefore, 7) the limen is a relational concept.

These notions are far from sufficient for a definition, but already they provide a picture of the limen as paradoxical, if not contradictory: a line of variable width joining, separating and making possible the sites it depends on for its existence. What I propose is that these traits can be accounted for by appeal to both the *forms* the limen adopts and the *events* it generates.

As regards its forms, in an earlier paper I argued that, unlike our conventional conceptualisations of ordinary space, thresholds *inflect* relative to, at least, four factors: cultural group, historical moment, point of departure (directionality, as Jochen Achilles reminded us in the debate), and point of view.[3] This intransitive use of the verb 'inflect' was meant to convey that limina are unsettled and stand revealed as open paradigms of forms: they can expand, contract, shift, replicate themselves, vanish and re-emerge (even an inert threshold can be activated by specific circumstances). In brief, the limen is not only a site that makes change possible, it is itself a changing site—one that exists only in transition. We therefore need to speak of a *dynamics* in two senses: as affecting individuals, objects or events on the limen, and as affecting the limen itself. In this paper I will concentrate on the events—the transitions—that take place on it.

Again tentatively, I will understand a transition as a process that may (but need not) result in change and that consists in a *negotiation* of the threshold. Whether the process actually

[2] Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage: Étude systématique des rites* (Paris: Picard 1991), pp. 14, 23, 25. Bjørn Thomassen, 'The Uses and Meanings of Liminality', *International Political Anthropology* 2:1 (2009), 5-27, p. 16). *Bjorn Thomassen - The Uses and Meanings of Liminality.pdf.

[3] See my 'Reading Liminality', *The TRELLIS Papers* nº 10 (2022), http://www.limenandtext.com/pdf/trellis%2010.pdf.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

reaches completion (for processes can derail, change tack, slow down, freeze over or revert), something does take place on the limen, and it is this dynamic event—and not just its outcome—that I will refer to as 'transition'.

For some time now, our group has been engaged in a research project part of whose brief is to take its ground on a number of case studies in order to define and theorise the processes that occur on the limen.[4] Relying on contributions by other participants and myself, I will outline some of the major types of transition that objects and characters can undergo on the limen. The claim is that these types constitute so many manifestations of one single dynamics, and hence that one concept—that of transition—should suffice for all areas of the textual field. Examples will be drawn from literature, culture and the sciences.

1) ***Dominant shift.*** The word 'Dominant' is used here in the sense given it by the Russian Formalists to designate a controlling feature of the system. A clear instance would be semantic shift, where a core trait of the word's meaning is displaced to the periphery and another takes central semantic place. For example, the verb 'to haunt' used to mean primarily to practice habitually, to resort to something frequently, to visit someone or someplace regularly.[5] Since about Shakespeare's time, a secondary trait (to frequent someone or someplace and in so doing to create a *disturbance*) has come to occupy central place, so that the verb is now primarily used of unseen or immaterial visitants (e.g., diseases, memories, spirits) that pursue, molest or threaten. This is the new Dominant, while the old senses now enjoy a mostly peripheral or archaic role.

The following is a simple diagram to convey a Dominant shift. Letters stand for features of the system; each set or box of features represents a phase of the system; the Dominant feature is capitalised; old features can be lost, and new features appear:[6]

Abc → *aBcd* → *Bcd* → ...

A Dominant shift obtains when a new genre emerges from an old one. When narrative verse (*A*) yielded to prose (*b*), the modern genre of the novel rose to prominence (*B*) out of romance, eventually to replace it (loss of *a*). Another example: Franco Moretti identifies a gradual Dominant shift in the use of clues on the part of British authors of detective stories.[7] Tales that provided no clues yielded to 1) tales where clues appeared, even though they were

[4] *The Transitions Project* is an ongoing research initiative set in motion by the LIMEN Research Group in 2019, so far without institutional support. For details see http://www.limenandtext.com/rst.html.

[5] See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (1989).

[6] To the best of my recollection, I first came across this diagram when, as a student at the U.I.A. in Antwerp, I attended a lecture by Itamar Even-Zohar (Tel-Aviv) in 1976 or 1977.

[7] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso 2005), 74. Moretti does not write of Dominants, but mine seems a fair reading of his argument.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

unnecessary to the plot. Then we had 2) *functional* clues that were, however, not visible to readers (only to the detective). Some productive instances of this offered 3) functional *visible* clues, but readers could not interpret them. At last, 4) functional, visible, *decodable* clues became the staple, 'a key "technical law" of the genre' (Moretti 74). The change from *b* to *B*—occupying the temporal threshold between two states of the genre—here seems to have occurred in four stages.

2) *Integration*. Instead of a shift from a familiar *A* to a new *B*, we can have a degree of amalgamation between two existing terms *A* and *B*. Opposites meld together as, for example, where image and language coalesce in ekphrasis, as discussed by Esteban Pujals in his commentary on a John Ashbery poem, by Simon Pritchard in his work on Don DeLillo.[8] For another instance, consider how reader and writer become indistinguishable in fan fiction, as Marta Vega observes in her research into digital literature.[9] Formally, this is not dissimilar from what happens in rites of passage according to Victor Turner: the initiands in the rite's liminal stage—that 'place which is not a place'—are divested of all status, insignia or social identity that would distinguish them from other initiands. Formerly differentiated individuals thus merge into an undifferentiated group, attaining that condition of 'intense comradeship and egalitarianism' which Turner has labelled *communitas*.[10] *Communitas*, ekphrasis, or the fusion of reader and writer roles constitute so many illustrations of the integrative force of limina.

3) *Limen erosion/deletion*. Some integrative processes may lead to the elimination of the threshold, and this affects the transitions that take place on it. Frontiers are (slowly and tentatively) disappearing in the European Union, and crossing the Spanish-French border nowadays becomes a perfunctory act largely shorn of political or cultural significance. In Postmodernist fiction, metalepsis erodes the boundaries between narrative layers with the result that, e.g., character and author can meet.[11] These are two tokens of one and the same principle, the erasure of limina. The transition consists in two complementary moves: cancelling the threshold, and bringing the contrasting elements together: $A / B \rightarrow AB$.

4) The converse is ***limen creation***. One way this can happen is when the boundaries of the nomad's territory are defined not by external agents but by the trajectories themselves of the nomad's existence.[12] In mathematics, an 'attractor' is defined as a region or shape to which

[8] Esteban Pujals, 'John Ashbery's Convex Mirror', in *Mapping the Threshold: Essays in Liminal Analysis*, ed. Nancy Bredendick (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2004), 91-98. Simon Pritchard, 'Ekphrasis as Liminal Language in the Fiction of Don DeLillo' (underway for the *Transitions Project*).

[9] Marta Vega, 'Fanfiction Writers: The Merging of Author and Reader', a talk delivered at the *2nd Postgraduate Seminar in Liminality Studies (PS[L]S2: Inhabiting the Threshold)* held at the UAM on 9-10 May 2019.

[10] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter 1969), 95.

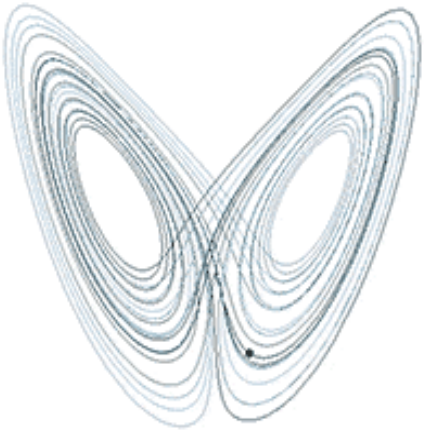
[11] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen 1987), 119-30.

[12] Sandor Klapcsik, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2012), 18-19; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit 1980).

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

points in a system are 'pulled' in the course of time, so that they can enter but not leave it. The shape and width of the attractor are determined by the set of all trajectories or 'orbits'; the set constitutes its 'basin of attraction'. 'If one imagines a complex system as a sink, then the attractor can be considered the drain at the bottom, and the basin of attraction is the sink's basin.'[13] In a chaotic (or 'strange') attractor (one which never reaches a point of rest), no two trajectories need ever be the same, but objects keep orbiting within the basin of attraction without ever leaving it. The outer limits of the basin are the equivalent of the boundary that defines the nomad's territory. These are instances where an object in transit creates its own limen. Figure 1 shows a double attractor with two basins, in which the black dot's trajectories orbit now one 'drain' now the other (it being impossible to predict which).

FIGURE 1. THE LORENZ 'STRANGE ATTRACTOR'.[14]



5) ***Phasing.*** Another way of creating a limen is what I have called *phasing*, the stalling or protracting of process through segmentation or iteration.[15] This is a narrative operation typically at work in wondertale and ballad which makes the hero confront not one but three giants in succession, or obtain not one but five magical objects, or fail several times only to eventually emerge victorious. An undertaking that we might expect to be straightforward (moving from action *A* to result *B*) comes to be lengthened into a series of surrogate versions or phases of *A*:

[13] David Darling, *The Encyclopedia of Science*, https://www.daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/A/attractor.html (last accessed, 29 October 2022). It is to be observed that in many attractors (the case of the 'strange attractor' presented in figure 1), the 'drain' will *not* swallow eventually the 'objects' that orbit it.

[14] Source: The Lorenz 'strange attractor', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenz_system (last accessed 10 November 2022).

[15] See my *The Thresholds of the Tale: Liminality and the Structure of Fairytales* (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2007), pp. 129-39.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

$$A/B \quad \rightarrow \quad A / a_1 / a_2 / a_3 / \ldots / a_n / B$$

What could be presented as one event is unfolded into several avatars of itself, or broken down into several episodes. Everything that happens in this extended limen—this 'phantom space' thus created between *A* and *B*—is provisional or parenthetical. Phasing generates suspense and tension, and enhances the worth of the hero who manages to overcome such odds.

6) ***Stasis.*** Retardation or, at the extreme, a blockage of process can be achieved through recourse to, for instance, fractal forms (as Elena Bermejo proposes for certain endings in fantasy fiction);[16] to labyrinth templates (narrative mazes seen as threshold spaces which challenge the very possibility of transition);[17] or to a systematic use of phasal structures that protract resolution indefinitely.[18] In Gothic fiction, massive phasing devalues deeds, turns them into interim action, and instils in characters a sense of hopelessness.[19]

Through stasis we enter the worlds of Kafka, Beckett, Buñuel, Pinter. The oneiric (or infernal) setting of Robbe-Grillet and Resnais' film *Last Year at Marienbad* contains a glimpse of a plot:[20] a man attempts to seduce (or to recover the love of) a married woman in the course of two encounters one year apart; but instead of advancing, this plot is reduplicated, fragmented and stalled by iterations, mirrors, loops, cycles, flashbacks, parallelisms, mise-en-abyme, the whole inconsistently (re)told by an autodiegetic narrative voice that incessantly recalls but that evinces faulty memory. All of this creates, on one level of interpretation, a permanent sense of immobility—a sojourn in Hell.[21]

7) ***Marginalisation***. The medieval codex used the margin for *scholia*, glosses, illuminations; *marginalia* engaged in dialogue with the text-block. In our print culture, the margin tends to be seen as a devalued limen, a blank peripheral zone closed on one side

[16] Elena Bermejo, 'The Never-ending Limen: Preliminal and Postliminal Thresholds in Selected Portal Fantasies', paper read at the conference *(De)Writing the Borderland: Human and Non-human Liminal Identities* held at the Universities of Santiago de Compostela and Vigo, 13-14 Jan 2022.

[17] Tareixa García de Polavieja and Manuel Aguirre, 'Labyrinths', paper read before the Transitions Seminar on 13 May 2022. A video recording is available at http://www.limenandtext.com/rst_online%20videos.html.

[18] Miriam Mandel proposed interesting variations on my phasal structures model in order to account for certain aspects of Hemingway's prose, including 'an insistence [on the text's part] on remaining within the area of uncertainty and chaos indefinitely; i.e., a refusal to resolve itself into either X or Y'. See her 'When the Liminal Becomes the Centre: The Case of Ernest Hemingway', in *Liminal Poetics, or The Aesthetics of Dissent*, ed. Belén Piqueras (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2008), 41-62, p. 44.

[19] See my 'Liminal Terror: The Poetics of Gothic Space', in *The Dynamics of the Threshold*, eds. Jesús Benito and Ana Mª Manzanas (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2006), 13-38.

[20] Alain Robbe-Grillet, scriptwriter, and Alain Resnais, director, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (Cocinor/ Cineriz 1961).

[21] By phasing a group's attempt at leaving a church, Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) generates an immobility that threatens the collapse of civilised values. Such TV series as involve characters in endless quests through unpredictable environments with ever protracted answers (*Lost*, or the recent *1899*) play on a similar premise. Indeed, the serialisation of plot is essentially phasal and often conduces to a sense of stasis, when not to an infernal experience.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

(edge, gutter) and open only to the prestigious and disdainful centre (the text-block or type area on the page). To marginalise is to relegate individuals or texts to the relative inconsequence of 'the margin'. In the context of literary tradition, the 'marginalised' tends to be defined by exclusion, as that which is not comprehended in the 'canon' of literature—popular fiction, children's literature, or, until more or less recently, women's writings, black, Hispanic or non-European works.[22] Needless to say, occupancy of this space does not constitute a trait inherent in such texts but a status that a given cultural group assigns to them at a certain point in time; we are not talking of a quality ('marginality') so much as of an operation ('marginalisation') that brings on another form of stasis.[23]

8) ***Interstitiality***. A third type of stasis is found in the crack or gutter between two sections of a surface or volume. The interstice is a margin so narrow and inconspicuous as to be ignored; it is the *neither/nor*, what does not pertain to either side of the crack. The protagonists of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* have come to live in the interstices of society, as have Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* or the fictional and non-fictional characters studied in Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*.[24] Our homeless, beggars, hoboes and immigrants occupy the same interstitial gap in the social system, a veritable 'place that is not a place'. Once again, it is not some intrinsic worthlessness that situates them there so much as a social act of exclusion.

9) ***Straddling***. If the interstitial lodges in the gap betwixt-and-between two structured spaces, the straddling expands to encompass both of these. Certain genres can be said to be transitional (as distinct from transitory)—the cases of jazz (a blend of work-song, blues and other genres) and eighteenth-century Gothic (half-way between literature and folklore).[25] Here belongs the 'double voice' of rap music studied by Andrés Guilló—at times the voice of the individual performer, at times that of his community.[26] Traditional heroes disport a liminal nature in that they bestride a physical, ethnic or cultural frontier. Natty Bumppo, the archetypal frontiersman, is of European descent but grew up among the Delaware Indians; El Cid is an exile who operates in Moorish territory but maintains an allegiance to his Castilian king; E. R. Burroughs' Tarzan hero is a British lord raised by apes. This, too, is the domain of the hybrid, the composite, the ambivalent—the in-between seen as an admixture of two or

[22] See, e.g., M. H. Abrams, 'Canon of Literature', in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th edn (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace 1999), 28-31, p. 30. For discussion see Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton, *Margins and Thresholds: An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies* (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2000), chapter 1. For a similar marginalisation of Afro-American comix see José María Conget's recent essay, 'Tesoros ocultos. Las comic strips de la prensa afroamericana' ('Hidden Treasures: The Afro-American Press Comic Strips'), in *Tebeosfera, tercera época*, 21 (14-XI-2022). Asociación Cultural Tebeosfera, Sevilla. Available online on 24 November 2022 at https://www.tebeosfera.com/documentos/tesoros_ocultos._las_comic_strips_de_la_prensa_afroamericana.html.

[23] See Paul Lauter, 'The Literatures of America: A Comparative Discipline', in *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford UP 1991), 48-96, p. 49.

[24] Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (1956; London: Pan Books 1963).

[25] Aguirre, 'A Gothic-Folktale Interface', in *Gothic Studies* 21:2 (2019), 159-75.

[26] Andrés Guilló Seuthe, '"I be" and "I are": The Liminal Nature of the First Person "I" in Rap Performance' (paper in progress for the *Transitions Project*).

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

more elements, not as *neither/nor* but as *both/and*. Viljoen and Van der Merwe offer a salutary observation on changing outlooks towards the hybrid in contemporary South-Africa:

> In the time of apartheid, […] the hybrid had an unenviable position, not properly belonging anywhere. But now the hybrid is at the heart of the search for new personal and communal identities.[27]

Most often, the terms 'hybrid', 'half-breed', 'Anglo-Indian', 'mulatto', 'mestizo' socially convey or did convey a derogatory and nullifying trait (the interstitial), but technically designate a bi-racial nature (the straddling); and it seems desirable to uncouple the liminality which characterises such individuals within a given group from the value-system (or the devaluation) which the group applies to them. An instructive instance is found in a Namibian ethnic community known as the Rehoboth Basters, descended from male Dutch settlers and black African women. I quote from a book I have not been able to consult but which is quoted in *Wikipedia*:

> The name Baster is derived from *bastaard*, the Dutch word for 'bastard' (or 'crossbreed'). While some people consider this term demeaning, the Basters use it as a 'proud name', claiming their ancestry and history, treating it as a cultural category in spite of the negative connotation.[28]

Whereas the word is derogatory and exclusionary in both Dutch and English, the Basters use it as a mark of distinction.

A brief parenthetical note may be useful at this point. Not everyone acknowledges precise differentiations between the various terms for the liminal. Thomassen, for instance, does not discriminate between 'the in-between', 'the interstitial' and 'the hybrid':

> To write from the interstices, from the in-between, can be recognised as a strategy in much postmodern or postcolonial literature. For Homi Bhabha (1994), for example, liminality relates to cultural hybridity. In much postmodern literature, the liminal positively has come to represent an interstitial position between fixed identifications. Liminality represents a possibility for a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Thomassen (2009: 18; see note 4).

This lumping together of terms may be a source of unnecessary confusion. I take 'in-between' to be the more general term, and to comprehend both 'the interstitial' as the *neither/nor* and 'the hybrid' as the *both/and*.

---

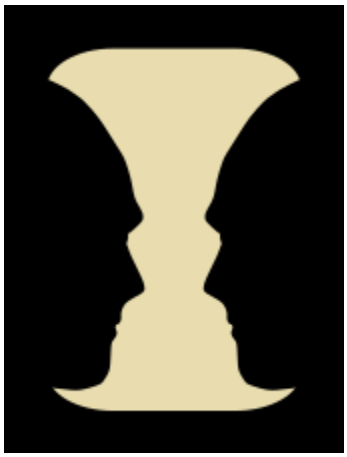
[27] Hein Viljoen and Chris N. Van der Merwe, eds., 'Introduction' to *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature* (New York: Peter Lang 2007), 2-26, p. 3.

[28] 'Baster', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baster (last accessed 20 October 2022), quoting from Rudolf Britz, Hartmut Lang and Cornelia Limpricht, *A Concise History of the Rehoboth Basters until 1990* (Rehoboth: Klaus Hess Publisher 1999), 12.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

10) ***Oscillation***. I take up Klapcsik's (2012: 2) term in preference to my initial 'fluctuation'. Edgar Rubin's bi-stable vase image (figure 2) alternately brings the white area to the fore as a vase and highlights the black area as two faces; but it is impossible to hold both views simultaneously.[29]

FIGURE 2. RUBIN'S VASE



Roger Hayward's *Undecidable Monument* (figure 3) similarly invites observers to shift their attention back and forth in endless negotiation between alternate readings: is it supported by two or by three pillars? There is no way to decide—it is the *either/and/or*.[30]

FIGURE 3. HAYWARD'S 'UNDECIDABLE MONUMENT'

[29] Image taken from 'Rubin Vase', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubin_vase (last accessed 10 October 2022).

[30] Image taken from 'Roger Hayward', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Hayward#/media/File:RogerHaywardUndecidable_Monument.jpg (last accessed 10 November 2022).

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Such instances as these suggest that at least certain kinds of transition are reversible inasmuch as our gaze oscillates between them. But do such images contain a limen? I would hazard to answer that they *are* pure limina, consisting in a potentiality that keeps nothing up its sleeve. Both possible realisations coexist explicitly and simultaneously in such a way as to create the characteristic disorientation of threshold space.

In *The Turn of the Screw* Henry James created an 'undecidable' plot: do the ghosts truly exist, or is the governess an unreliable narrator? Todorov views this novel as a supreme example of *le fantastique*, teasing as it does the line between the natural and the marvellous without quite taking sides: 'The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a being only familiar with the laws of nature, confronted with a seemingly supernatural event'.[31] As we are left wavering between interpretations, 'the fantastic occupies the time of this uncertainty'.[32] Todorov's assessment is susceptible of a liminalist approach: what confronts us in James' book is a threshold situation whose resolution in one or the other direction—towards the uncanny or towards the marvellous—is suspended. If this novel epitomises the fantastic, it might follow that fantasy is a liminal genre insofar as it splices together, in disturbing or exhilarating ways, two or more incompatible orders.[33]

M. H. Abrams points out that until 1965 we had just one single reading of Wordsworth's poem 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal', then along came Hugh Sykes Davies with a radically different interpretation.[34] Leaving aside the question whether the second is as cogent and comprehensive as the first, the fact remains that, for nearly sixty years, literary scholars have been faced with the necessity to negotiate between readings. Here, as in the cases of Rubin, Hayward or James, the gaze of observers, readers and critics is invited to re-focus repeatedly in what Gestalt theory calls multi-stable perception. One can only negotiate this threshold back and forth—a transition without resolution.

11) ***Dislocation***. I make this term cover a form of oscillation in which one object unfolds into two, giving rise to an unsuspected limen (cf. types 4, *Limen-creation*, and 12, *Multiformity*). This is manifest in characters confronted with a Double or Doppelgänger of themselves; they are no other than latter-day self-conscious avatars of the traditional liminal hero (type 9, *Straddling*). Doctor Jekyll discovers that there are two aspects of himself; but this eminent Victorian fears to straddle the line, abhors his second self as 'evil', and wishes to

[31] *Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel*. Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil 1970), 29; my translation).

[32] *Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude* (ib., 29; my translation).

[33] While James' novel is an instance of the exclusive *either/or*, other works of fantasy such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* rather exemplify the inclusive *both/and*: the hobbits' mundane world is forced to interact with that of the magic of wizards and elves.

[34] M. H. Abrams, 'How to Prove an Interpretation', in *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem, and Other Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company 2012), 106-29.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

retain only one of his identities—to preserve what he chooses to consider a stable version of himself. Let me insist, as I did for type 9, that we must keep separate the phenomenon itself from the valuation brought upon it. It is true that most nineteenth-century characters rue their second self's existence, and so does William Wilson detest his fetch in Poe's story; but the second Wilson is only trying to reform his evil original, and so readers waver between the necessary sympathy for a first-person protagonist and the unquestionably moral nature of his Other.[35]

The bulk of African literature in English since Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka can be productively read in a liminalist key, as negotiating a 'second identity' for the cultures arisen from colonialism. Indeed, it is to be asked whether these literatures were not given a decisive impetus by the need to deal with the multiple limina that opened up between a 'them' which had partly grafted itself onto the native identity, and an 'us' which had lost much of its tradition and authority. Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* depicts an individual and a culture torn by conflicting value systems. Nigerian John Munonye deploys a panoply of contrasts (past/present, colonial/postcolonial, tradition/modernity, country/city) in his *Bridge to a Wedding*, with the theme of the bridge playing a key role.[36] Aspects of the same 'bridge' are tackled in much post-apartheid South-African fiction and poetry;[37] and, as Beatriz Sánchez has shown, the theme continues in recent Nigerian writing.[38] These appear to be tokens of a cultural dislocation from which new hybrid identities may come into view.

12) ***Multiformity***. This is the quality of a text which exists in several versions—the characteristic form of ballad, folktale, epic and myth.[39] It is also found in the medieval practice of redaction, which was understood as the proper mechanism for composition: one did not create a new text, one *redacted* (that is, copied, improved, interpreted and innovated upon) those of others.[40] Its equivalents in modern times are rewriting and translation;[41] remakes, sequels, prequels; and, as Belén Piqueras observes in the digital domain, *remediation*.[42]

On 17 November, 2021, the president of the American Anthropological Association formally and publicly apologised to America's indigenous communities for what he called

[35] For doubles, see Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1985).

[36] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (London: Heinemann 1970); John Munonye, *Bridge to a Wedding* (London: Heinemann 1978).

[37] See the essays in Viljoen and Van der Merwe, eds., 2007 (note 27).

[38] Beatriz Sánchez Santos, 'In Search of the Post-liminal Stage in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*', read before the Transitions Seminar on 8 April 2022.

[39] See my 'Reading Liminality' (note 3).

[40] See Racha Kirakosian, *From the Material to the Mystical in Late Medieval Piety: The Vernacular Transmission of Gertrude of Helfta's Visions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2021), p. 34.

[41] André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge 1992).

[42] Belén Piqueras, 'Liminal Transactions in the Digital Age: An Anatomy of "Remediation"' (work in progress for the *Transitions Project*).

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

'American anthropology's hegemonic *narrative'*, and deprecated the fact that anthropologists 'have often assigned themselves the status of "expert" over the cultural *narratives* and social *histories* of the first cultures of the Americas' (my italics).[43] The wording is revealing: even scientific accounts are *versions* of events, and what anthropology has acknowledged is that its *narrative* was not unique but part of a gamut of versions, and not even one to be privileged over the native ones.[44]

13) ***Plot inflexion***. Another token of the same principle confronts us on the intra-textual level when a wondertale assigns divergent endings to the same adventure: failure on the part of the hero's antagonist—the elder brother who precedes him, the envious king who apes his steps, the dragon who has kidnapped the princess he seeks—corresponds to victory for the hero. I have elsewhere described this twofold arrangement as responding to a 'Law of Double Narrative' characteristic of folklore, and I have suggested that 'reading' rites of passage as if they were *text* discloses a similar second narrative in the experience of the unsuccessful neophyte.[45] The plot structure of literary texts, too, would seem to negotiate between alternatives, but its twofold (actually, multi-fold) construction has been naturalised for us to such a degree that we are not always aware of how our reading of *Hamlet* treads a persistent threshold where the prince and his antagonists refract each other, or of how the plot of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is shaped by an interplay of multiple mirrors.

14) ***Voice inflexion*.** From David Lodge's analysis we must conclude that no less than three voices weave themselves into the opening lines of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: we hear the utterance of an authorial narrator encompassing (through free indirect style) the voice of the mature Mrs Dalloway in Westminster, which in turn hosts (through the use of pluperfect tenses and exclamations) that of her eighteen-year-old self at Bourton.[46] Such strategies as free indirect style, dramatic and interior monologues, stream of consciousness, or the *dialogism* of the modern novel inflect the elementary narrative voice. Through these techniques, thresholds spring up athwart the illusory simplicity of utterance, inasmuch as the single voice bestrides the line between two or more individuals (or the text transitions from one voice to another).[47]

*** *** ***

[43] Akhil Gupta, 'Apology to the Indigenous Community', American Anthropological Association, 17 November 2021, AAA Apology To the Indigenous Community - News - Stay Informed (americananthro.org) (last accessed 9 November 2022).

[44] It is to be surmised that Gupta's is no plea for solipsistic research; it rather implies that the scientific enterprise must incorporate into its account previously neglected data: *emic* by the side of *etic* information.

[45] See my 'Reading Liminality' (note 3). For the term 'law' I leant on the precedent of Axel Olrik's 'epic laws of oral narrative'; see his *Principles for Oral Narrative Research*, trans. Kirsten Wolf and Jody Jensen (1921; Bloomington: Indiana UP 1992), chapter 2.

[46] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin 1992), pp.41-45.

[47] On the concept of 'hybrid utterance' see Mihail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press 1981), 259-421.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Not unlike that constant vibrational state which, particle physicists surmise, characterises subatomic strings, textual 'objects' that are more and less than themselves—word, book, genre, plot, voice, character, space, time—are apt to manifest in states of permanent or recurrent transition: they straddle themselves. The fourteen cases examined above represent only some of the many types of transition conceivable, and it will be useful to identify, define and illustrate others, and to correlate them with these. But at this juncture it is needful to ask, what is the point of this exercise? First of all, it provides us with a panoramic view of transitions—a rough map of the dynamics of the textual field. Provisional as it is, the typology helps us break down that intractable *flux* of things mentioned by Pritchard (see above) into manageable chunks of motion, so to speak; and so, it affords us critics a measure of control over them. Further, that we should be able to tap sociocultural and scientific examples by the side of textual ones within one and the same framework intimates that we do not require independent handlings of separate classes; there seems to be some kind of organic unity at work to the extent that we can postulate one single principle to cover them: liminality. It is becoming clear that the study of the liminal cuts across all disciplines and frameworks.

To complicate the picture, limina themselves exist, as suggested earlier, 'in transition'—they are relational, experiential, place- and time-bound, directional (i.e., sensitive to our angle of approach). Furthermore, they are often modulated by assessment, i.e., tied to certain value-systems, and at least in three different types (hybridisation, marginalisation, dislocation) it has proven advisable to unyoke the transition itself from value judgments projected onto it. This caution should be extended at least to multiformity, to cases where Romantic prejudice assumes that the single original is 'better' or deserves more serious analysis than the multiform—that iteration (another form of liminalisation) somehow debases the text.[48] The forms and dynamics of limina are thus determined by perspective, directionality, historical moment and valuation. Not only entities and forces are active on the threshold, then, but the threshold itself 'vibrates' to (at least) these four factors.

By the same token—and in agreement with a caveat voiced by Ineke Jolink in the course of the debate—it will be well to remember the interdependence of theory and practice: they operate on different scales, but they feed off each other. It is a truism that all fruitful analysis builds on some (explicit or otherwise) theoretical base; conversely, no theorisation is possible unless it is grounded in properly argued evidence. These two sides of the critical discipline—analysis, conjecture—shape a most productive variation on the Oscillation type: in shunting

[48] And it may be a token of the tone of our modern culture that so much de-valuation is cast upon instances of the liminal. We seem bent upon *excluding* it from our understanding of the cultural field.

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre (2023) is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

from one level to another, our outlook on the issue is enriched. In this sense (but perhaps not in every sense), literary criticism partakes of the nature of the liminal.

Something similar happens within the domain itself of analysis, inasmuch as it seems difficult to discuss textual transitions without examining the forms of the threshold itself. If limina are subject to inflexion, the changes they undergo will affect the processes that take place on them, and vice versa. Limen and process—form and dynamics—are indivisible aspects of the whole, and analysis will need to shunt from the one to the other and back—another case of productive oscillation.

Referencing this paper:

Manuel Aguirre, 'Towards a Typology of Transitions', *The TRELLIS Papers* Nº 12 (2023), http://www.limenandtext.com/publishing_thetrellispapers.html

'Towards a Typology of Transitions' by Manuel Aguirre is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.