THE TRELLIS PAPERS

9.

THE THRESHOLD AS ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE IN NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

Isabel Soto

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

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The Threshold as Organizing Principle in Neo-slave Narrative[1]

Isabel Soto

This essay proposes that a major strategy of slave narrative, whether antebellum or contemporary, lies in its preoccupation with transitions and the transcendence of limits and borders. I argue that slave narrative is a profoundly liminal genre, organizing itself around thresholds of both a literal and a figurative nature. Thus we find certain plot conventions, such as the movement from bondage to freedom (or its chiastic variant, from freedom to slavery to freedom), from pre-literacy to literacy, from ignorance to understanding, from

[1] This paper was published in *Revisiting Slave Narratives/Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves* (Les Carnets du Cerpac: Montpellier, 2005, 102-119. https://www.pulm.fr/index.php/collections/horizons-anglophones/pocopages.html?limit=all). The volume was the result of a conference by the same name held at Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III (2003) at which my paper was first presented. It is offered here as an early effort to theorize the presence of thresholds in African American narrative practice. On preparing this latest version for *The Trellis Papers*, I have ensured that it adheres to the original print version as closely as possible. A few things need to be pointed out: I have retained references to Richard Ellis's paper in its pre-publication form since these were modified, deleted or otherwise revised for the published version that appeared in *Mapping the Threshold: Essays in Liminal Analysis* (Ed. Nancy Bredendick. Madrid: SLL4, The Gateway Press, 2004). Secondly, I have corrected a number of fifteen-year-old glitches that escaped the final editing process, the most important one replacing the term 'latter' with 'former' in reference to 'space'. I also include the brief bibliography as it appeared in its final published form. If I were to write the paper today, I would no doubt write it differently, hopefully better; I would certainly balance my emphasis on the spatial qualities of the limen with its temporal function – what Ellis refers to as the transitional. Not coincidentally, it is the transitional aspect of the threshold which informs the LIMEN Research Group's current research.

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submission and helplessness to resistance and agency. The somewhat paratactical and picaresque arrangement of elements both underscores and facilitates these shifts.[2]

My paper will discuss, then, the ways and means by which slave narrative engages, articulates and explores thresholds, boundaries, margins. My chief contemporary textual source is David Anthony Durham's *Walk Through Darkness* (2002), though I will also be giving examples from antebellum slave narrative. My theoretical approach and methodology derive directly from a publicly funded research project – *Threshold and Text* – of which I was a member and whose self-appointed objective was 'to explore and refine the notion of the threshold as a theoretical instrument and apply it in specific studies that will help articulate the theory'.[3]

I divide my paper roughly into three parts: firstly, a section in which I theorize the threshold and offer an exposition of its functions and positionality. Secondly, I illustrate these propositions with examples from canonical slave narrative texts and, thirdly and lastly, I show how contemporary or neo-slave narratives reveal an allegiance to similar narrative patterns and textual strategies.

'I see thresholds everywhere', a co-researcher once confessed in exasperation. Indeed, there is a real danger of unleashing a proliferation of thresholds in our theoretical practice that would impoverish the term and deprive it of practical use in the field of textual studies. On the other hand, it may just be that the threshold – or *limen*, to borrow the anthropological term in turn taken from the Latin – is a fitting metaphor for the study of space, time, process and development, all in themselves ubiquitous elements in narrative discourse, slave-authored or otherwise. Alternatively put, the threshold metaphor is simply a useful tool of analysis and explication, no more, no less.

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[2] This paper has been much enriched by the seminar *Mapping the Threshold* (Madrid, 24-25 March, 2003) in which I participated and, more specifically, by a talk given at that seminar by Richard Ellis of Nottingham Trent University. Professor Ellis generously offered me his then unpublished talk – ''Dangerous, inauspicious and polluting': The Limen, Liminal Transition and Space' – from which I will be quoting (see Ellis 2004).

[3] The full title in Spanish was *Texto y Umbral: desarrollo de una teoría de la liminaridad de aplicación en el campo del discurso literario.* Dirección General de Enseñanza Superior e Investigación Científica, 2000-03 (Ref.: BFF 2000.0093).

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That said, it does no harm to fine-tune our metaphor, consider more closely the what and where of the threshold. The where is fairly straightforward: the threshold lies or is generated between two or more spaces or systems or discourses, providing mutual contact between, or access from, one to another. What the threshold does, its function in other words, is predicated on its inter-spatial or inter-systemic positionality. How it negotiates the spaces between the spaces, is not coincidentally explained perhaps by referencing the structure of metaphor itself. A metaphor has two components, a tenor and a vehicle, the relationship between which is paradoxical, since the tenor is emphatically not the vehicle, yet just as emphatically is. In other words, while tenor may not be reducible to vehicle, just as the threshold's flanking spaces are not reducible to one another, each *partakes of the other*. This dynamic is facilitated by the limen, that communicating duct. The porousness that I ascribe to the limen or threshold is congruous with Victor Turner's formulation of the limen as 'the mid-point of transition of a status-sequence between two positions' (237) and his identification of the 'structure-dissolving quality of liminality' (263). In other words, space C is vulnerable to space A as a result of the 'transitional' positionality and performativity of the limen which we could ascribe to and designate as space B. In effect, 'here' cannot be differentiated in absolute terms from 'there' since 'here' leads to 'there', just as 'oneself' is 'the other' redefined.

Talking about the threshold in terms of spatial metaphors (space A, B, etc., mapping the threshold, and so on) while referencing process or transition reveals its paradoxical nature. Richard Ellis parses Turner's formulation of the term *limen* thus: 'a liminal space, a liminal phase and a liminal transition... a synthesis, in which the limen is, more or less, a space that is a phase that is a transition' (2-3). Ellis adds, 'The terms intercalate, but this intercalation can vary in emphasis.' As poet and scholar Esteban Pujals once pointed out, the limen is ontologically insulting.[4] In my opening remarks, I myself tried to phrase this paradox in Madrid the following way:

> We can say *where* [the threshold] lies – between two or more spaces or systems – and suggest *what* it does...Thus we propose that the threshold mediates as well as separates, both imitates and translates; destabilizes, transmits even as it transforms.

[4] Private conversation. October 1999.

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> This performative dimension of the limen is...bound to its ontological status as the necessary site for where these functions may take place. The limen can only do what it does by being where it is.

We debated for two days over how, indeed whether, to map the threshold and whether it was possible to resolve the seeming inconsistency: is it limen as process or limen as space? For me, perhaps, the appeal of the limen lies precisely in its resistance to an either/or taxonomy, a resistance that may well explain its singular aptness for explicating such practices as I noted just now: imitation, translation, destabilization, transmission, transformation, all of which are practices connotative of displacement, destabilization, incompletion. The texts I consider below engage in that paradox: the spatial alongside the transitional, each enfranchising a different sort of liminality, the one positional or spatial, even literal; the other performative and figurative.

I am alert to the danger that an arrangement into the spatial and the transitional, or literal and figurative, may actually de-emphasize or obfuscate the versatility of the threshold as an instrument of textual explication. The threshold or limen is most fertile when we focus on 'what happens when an emphasis on 'space' gives way to an emphasis on 'transition''. The former 'produces more of a 'cultural geography' of the limen; [an emphasis] on transition, more of a cultural history' (Ellis 2). Thus in its transitional mode, the limen can expose the sort of textual practice that made slave narrative such a highly paraphrastic genre. Slave narrative, I argue, is profoundly liminal in that it provides a site where a multitude of discourses, western and non-western, converge. This zone of convergence, or encounter in contemporary critical parlance, is consistent with Mary Louise Pratt's conceptualization of the contact zone as a space which facilitates a process whereby 'subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant culture' (6). Slave narrative appropriates, elides, talks to, signifies upon, such materials from the dominant culture as the King James Bible, the discourse of freedom and the Enlightenment, sentimental fiction, among others, while not abandoning incorporation of African cosmology. Slave narrative is a discourse generated among many other discourses, therefore, a practice which places it within and beyond, or betwixt and between, Western textual paradigms, articulating not coincidentally the liminal status of the slave narrators themselves. As Paul Gilroy declares with regard to the 'vital arts of the slaves' produced within and against the

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exploitative and brutal discourse of New World slavery, 'the striking doubleness that results from this unique position – in an expanded West but not completely of it – is a definitive characteristic of the intellectual history of the black Atlantic' (58).

I'd like to look briefly at a couple of instances in which contrasting discursive paradigms transcend and elide across their respective borders to produce a discourse that is expressive of 'creolisation, métissage, and hybridity' (Gilroy 2). *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gonniowsaw, An African Prince, Written by Himself* (1770?), one of the earliest published examples of antebellum slave narrative, has been variously identified by Henry Louis Gates as either an early forerunner of the passing narrative or, on the contrary, as a text which inscribes itself within the anti-slavery invective characteristic of slave narrative.[5] My own position supports Gates' former interpretation voiced in *The Slave's Narrative* and *The Signifying Monkey*: that Gronniawsaw's narrative traces a profound alienation from his African origins.[6] Whatever competing interpretation you support, however, there is no disagreement over the fact that Gronniawsaw's text evinces what, in reference to Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative,* Gilroy identifies as 'an uneasy hybrid of the sacred and the secular, the African and the American' (61). The text's inter-discursive practice, in which allusions to African cosmology jostle alongside, *inter alia,* a proliferation of Biblical quotations, is mediated through the speaking/writing subject who traces a paradigmatic journey from pre-literate, captured African slave to literacy and freedom. In the passage across various ontological, geographical, cultural and linguistic thresholds, Gronniawsaw interrogates his pre-captivity self by adopting the discourse of the dominant culture within which he is obliged to re-inscribe his own. Thus Gronniawsaw 'was strongly impressed ... that there was some GREAT MAN of power which resided above the sun, moon and stars, the objects of our worship' (29). Monotheism is thus retrospectively privileged by the mature narrator over African polytheism; similarly, Gronniawsaw seeks to validate his post-captivity self by referencing a beloved sister in Africa who was 'quite white,

[5] 'Gronniawsaw's *An African Prince...* was a text that both talked 'black', and, through its unrelenting indictment of the institution of slavery, talked back' (*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. And Nellie Y. McKay. New York, London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1997. xxviii).

[6] *The Slave's Narrative* 12. *The Signifying Monkey* 132-140.

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and fair, with fine light hair, though my father and mother were black' (31). I have argued elsewhere that these are strategies that seek to replace blackness with whiteness as a trope of origin and authenticity, strategies that famously also invoke 'the trope of the talking book',[7] whose silence he attributes to the fact that 'everybody and everything despised me because I was black' (34).

Gronniawsaw's narrative negotiates various thresholds, both in the spatial sense of, say, moving from Africa to the New World via the black Atlantic yet also and much more interestingly, by constituting itself among multiple and competing discourses, each one of which partakes of all the others. There is, finally, no single undifferentiated text, but one which remains, in Ellis's term, 'unreconciled' to its multiple generic or cultural models. Further, his observation that 'literary production constitutes a threshold transition between genre and/or form ... and their reconfiguration in processes of specific literary production (the text's taking up of genre and its adjustment of genre)' (20-21) could have been made with slave narrative in mind.

My next example comes from that most canonical of slave narratives, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), and it is the pivotal scene of confrontation between Douglass and Covey. The physical encounter from which Douglass emerges victorious, generating in the process 'a liberatory definition of masculinity' (Gilroy 63), is often discussed with reference to the preceding encounter with fellow slave Sandy. Sandy (who later betrays would-be runaway slaves) represents the continuity of an African belief system: 'he professed to believe in a system for which I have no name. He was a genuine African, and had inherited some of the so-called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and eastern nations' (61). Sandy persuades Douglass to wear a magic root which will, he says, protect Douglass from Covey's physical abuse. Unconvinced, Douglass nevertheless takes Sandy's advice and in the inevitable confrontation, prevails over Covey. Two important strategies emerge here: the inscribing of a non-Western discourse or system of belief as part of a narrative which constitutes itself within a context of Western modernity and, further, in Paul Gilroy's reading, the authorial subversion of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. For Gilroy, it is Douglass

[7] Gates *The Signifying Monkey* 127-169.

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who emerges triumphantly as 'possessed of "consciousness that exists for itself"' and the defeated oppressor who represents a 'consciousness that is repressed within itself' (60).

By appealing to Hegelian dialectic, Gilroy's insight exposes one of the intertextual or intersystemic thresholds Douglass's narrative has to negotiate. I argue that we can go further and make the same episode reveal crucial intrasystemic thresholds across which the narrative signifies. At the risk of drawing the accusation of practising a presentist analysis, I propose that the central confrontation scene in Douglass's narrative should be read as mise-en-abyme, the conditions for which are outlined by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*. It is worth quoting McHale at length:

> A true *mise-en-abyme* is determined by three criteria: first, it is a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation *resembles* ... something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this 'something' that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation reproduces or *duplicates* the *primary* representation as a whole. Such a salient and continuous aspect might be, for instance, the story at the primary level; or its narrative situation (narrator, narratee, act of narration, and so on); or the style or poetics of the primary narrative text (original emphasis, 124-5).

The Douglass-Covey confrontation meets the criteria proposed by McHale: the confrontation with Covey marks a turning point in the narrator's (ultimately successful) bid for freedom and functions as the distillation of the primary text's philosophical concerns and narrative strategies; it duplicates the centrality of the narrator and the emplotment of the main text (slave seeks freedom, slave challenges the enslaving system, slave gains freedom); the confrontation scene also validates (again, through duplication) the philosophical challenge to the system (the black person's predestined and hence immutable condition as slave is overturned). For Gilroy the episode's interest lies above all in its challenge to the received wisdom of modernity *à propos* of Africans; for me the interest lies also in how that challenge is articulated through the self-referential strategy of the mise-en-abyme, the embedded or nested nature of which further draws attention to the presence of thresholds within the text. Stated from another angle, it is the presence of these inner thresholds that at once frames the

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textual levels and invites their crossing. As an afterthought I would add that Gilroy's reading and my own interpretation suggest that labels such as intertextual and intratextual may be merely a matter of emphasis, as Chris Baldick's entry on intertextuality suggests: 'In the literary theories of structuralism and post-structuralism, texts are seen to refer to other texts (*or to themselves as texts*) rather than to an external reality. The term intertext has been used variously for a text drawing on other texts, for a text thus drawn upon, and for the relationship between both' (my emphasis, 112).

Turning now to David Anthony Durham's *Walk through Darkness*, I argue that the novel engages in similar threshold-crossings and transitions as those I have been discussing with regard to antebellum slave narrative. Stuart Hall, lucid as ever, has alerted us to the danger of establishing an unproblematic relationship of present to past cultural productions: 'There can ... be no simple "return" or "recovery" of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms' (163). On the one hand, Durham draws on narrative strategies and motifs we have come to associate with slave narrative – the flight to freedom, the reversal tale, the centrality of literacy, the crossing of water, the rhetoric of liberty – its typology, in short, to use James Olney's term. At the same time, these elements are re-written and inscribed within a distinct genre – a slave narrative that is no longer antebellum slave narrative – that recalls Ellis's observation that 'literary production constitutes a threshold transition between genre and/or form ... and their reconfiguration in processes of specific literary production' (20).

I want to look, therefore, at how certain slave narrative conventions constitute themselves around the threshold or thresholds in *Walk through Darkness.* The title, in its unleashing of a double discourse, already bespeaks a liminalist practice: is the first word a noun or a verbal command? The preposition similarly produces a semantic doubling, connoting a literalist spatial movement as well as a figurative process. Overall, the title reaches back across time to such 'vital arts of the slaves' as the sorrow songs/spirituals with their strongly teleological titles.

Walk through Darkness liberally practises techniques of doubling, whether horizontally as part of the plot (there are two narratives, two brothers, two sisters, a man and his dog, a pair

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of murderous slaves...) or vertically, as part of an overall palimpsestic strategy whereby traces of previous generic models are invited to inflect the text. It is a text which positively trumpets its liminalism, then, and not least in its visual doubleness whereby the two narratives are presented in alternating typeface and separated by breaks on the page.[8]

William, the runaway slave, is most obviously and literally shadowed by Morrison, a white man, throughout the pages of the novel; William is also ancestrally twinned with Frederick Douglass, whose features form themselves behind William's:

> His face was handsome in the partial light. Clean lines of his jaw. Thin bridged nose that flared strongly at the nostrils. Dark eyes that sat heavy on their lower lids. His complexion was hard to classify, neither pale nor truly dark, but some shade between. His face betrayed commingled features, bits and pieces of foreign lands set beside each other and somehow more beautiful for it (3).

The lexical content of this passage – partial light, hard to classify, neither pale nor dark, some shade between, commingled features, foreign lands set beside each other – not coincidentally prepares the reader to expect shifts, pairings and problematic blendings. From the declaration 'He had been born a slave', displaced from its traditional pre-eminence as the text's opening words to a place towards the end of the second page, to William's various immersions in and crossings of the Chesapeake Bay, to his anguished sense of fatherlessness, unexpectedly and movingly relieved in the final pages, Frederick Douglass is the silent, unstated, yet ever-present character in this narrative which, like its historical model, is also a quest narrative. Suffice it to say also that the narrative propels itself forwards by crossing a series of thresholds and spaces that ultimately bring the reader to a crossing of the waters which is both final (we close the book) and also suggestive of further crossings and thresholds. Again, that paradox, where the limen connotes spatial movement as well as transition.

Walk through Darkness makes liberal use of mise-en-abyme, embedded tales through which the larger narrative explicates itself. Thus, the almost biblical tale-within-a-tale of the Morrison brothers draws attention to the novel's overall strategy of doubling or twinning and advances the theme of commonality among human beings. Similarly, the marvellous vignette

[8] This technique is already present in Durham's previous novel *Gabriel's Story* (2000).

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where Morrison unsuccessfully tries to coerce his hound to follow him, only to achieve his purpose as soon as he desists, references the theme of individual liberty.[9]

The novel makes manifest its concern with thresholds by frequently and explicitly appealing to the spaces between. Sometimes the space is just that: a space which separates white from black neighbourhoods, yet also a space that has to be breached and therefore in some sense also a space that connects the two communities: 'The walk took a little over ten minutes, but in that space of time one world merged into another. The large houses disappeared, as did white faces and swept roads and any inkling of grandeur' (55). More often than not the spaces lie between individuals whom they similarly bind even as they separate, differentiate while they elide. Thus there is the space between slave and master: 'William ... wasn't sure how to answer ... He wasn't sure which way to respond, and it didn't occur to him...to answer truthfully. "Suh?" he said, casting the word somewhere between a statement and a question' (27). Or again, between a humane white captain and William: '[The captain's] gaze drifted away from William and hovered somewhere in the space between them' (116). The negotiation of the spaces between gathers speed narratively speaking as William's and Morrison's stories gradually converge finally to synthesize in the closing pages so that William's story becomes Morrison's and vice-versa.

Language itself becomes the mediating principle, as in the following quote: 'He wanted to explain himself in some way that went beyond the words he was speaking. He wished he could get to the other side of them, so that she would understand him from the inside' (235). *He* is Morrison and *she* is Dover, William's pregnant lover, and the scene incidentally recalls and revisions the sequence between a pregnant and chained Dessa Rose and white chronicler Adam Nehemiah, except that in Durham's version it is the white man who is compelled 'to explain himself'. Words acquire corporeality and move in to fill the interstice between persons as Morrison passes his story written on a piece of paper to Dover to give to William

[9] Further, that the message is mediated through a dog reaches back intratextually to Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), in which Fido the dog is the instrument that powerfully revisions racist relations of power. The protagonist Frado responds to the command of her brutal mistress to eat off her dirty plate by having Fido lick it clean first, thereby privileging the non-human over a white person. As one critic notes, '[Frado] ... prefer[s] the merely animal to the monstrous' (Stern 455).

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to read. Through William's act of reading, words arrange themselves, finally, as a site of convergence visually indicated to the reader by having both typefaces (William's and Morrison's) occupy the same narrative sequence. Signification becomes the ultimate contact zone – 'He had a father. He had seen his face' (276). – yet William's appropriation of the sign (the letter) is problematic and paradoxical since rather than providing fixity and resolution, it serves to affirm irreducible difference, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. The past catches up and blends with the present, a convergence – of past histories and the present, father and son – that serves to generate unforeseen possibilities, further thresholds. It is no coincidence, finally, that the novel closes on a scene that is deeply liminalist in its emergence from and evocation of multiple possibilities: fleeing the United States in a Canada-bound ship, Dover gives birth to William's child, looked on by Morrison. One is inevitably reminded of Paul Gilroy's choice of the image of a ship – 'a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion' (4) – as one that forces us to ponder on the middle passage or black Atlantic, that vast space between that enables a 'redemptive return to Africa' as well as 'circulation ... and ... movement' (ibid.).

I end as I began by upholding the centrality of the limen or threshold in slave narrative, connotative not only of place and space but also, perhaps especially, of transition and process. Durham's crossing of the water underscores Ellis's formulation of the limen as space as phase as transition, reaching out imaginatively to the black Atlantic whose history, Gilroy reminds us, 'yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade' (xi).

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