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MODELLING THE LIMEN

Manuel Aguirre

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MODELLING THE LIMEN

Manuel Aguirre

In 2004 Nancy Bredendick, a founding member of the LIMEN Research Group, edited a volume of essays titled *Mapping the Threshold*.[1] The metaphor in the title was suggested by the conventional spatiality of thresholds, but was it possible to map 'a place that is not a place,' as Turner famously called the limen?[2] Several contributors to the volume pointed out that 'map' suggested a static construct having span, shape and position, hardly suitable to the turbulence and mercuriality we have long been familiar with in liminalist studies. If a map was to be obtained, it was apt to look, as Bredendick herself put it, 'more meteorological than geographical' (p. 1). The present paper continues a thought process begun with that volume twenty years ago, and aims to offer a draft of a model—a map that is not a map—to facilitate visualisation of the no-place. Central to it will be an attempt at providing a sense of the dynamic that prevails in liminal space.[3]

Our first hurdle is this: the rite of passage, as defined by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner with its three distinctive stages (pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal), does not furnish an adequate model for literary and textual studies. It is not so much its structure as its application that poses problems. The way the model is handled in anthropology and other disciplines tends to direct attention onto the post-liminal stage of the rite—onto resolution. It involves a linear, goal-oriented, *telic* approach that *expects* completion, so that endings at variance with those predicted by the model are assumed to be non-standard or even deviant

[1] Nancy Bredendick, ed., *Mapping the Threshold: Essays in Liminal Analysis* (Madrid: The Gateway Press, 2008).

[2] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974), 239.

[3] This paper is the result of a talk given in December 2023 before the Transitions Seminar, an online bi-monthly initiative set in motion by the LIMEN Research Group. The paper is part of the ongoing *Transitions Project*, a research initiative engaged in theorising the concept of liminality in literature studies, so far without institutional or governmental support. I am grateful to all participants for the discussion, which allowed me to revise some notions and to hone others. All errors are my own.

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forms of the passage.[4] The equivalent in narrative terms would be to place the focus of analysis on closure as the standard or 'natural' form of ending. A concentration on closure would presuppose that texts necessarily exhibit a linear development towards some form of stasis; but not even the seemingly naïve wondertale abides by this assumption (see below).

If we understand the limen as a site of transition, we need to direct our gaze towards the middle stage: to abandon closure and completion as the 'natural goal' of the process, and to centre on the transition, and therefore on the limen itself. We may visualise the process as a modification on the three-stage model:[5]

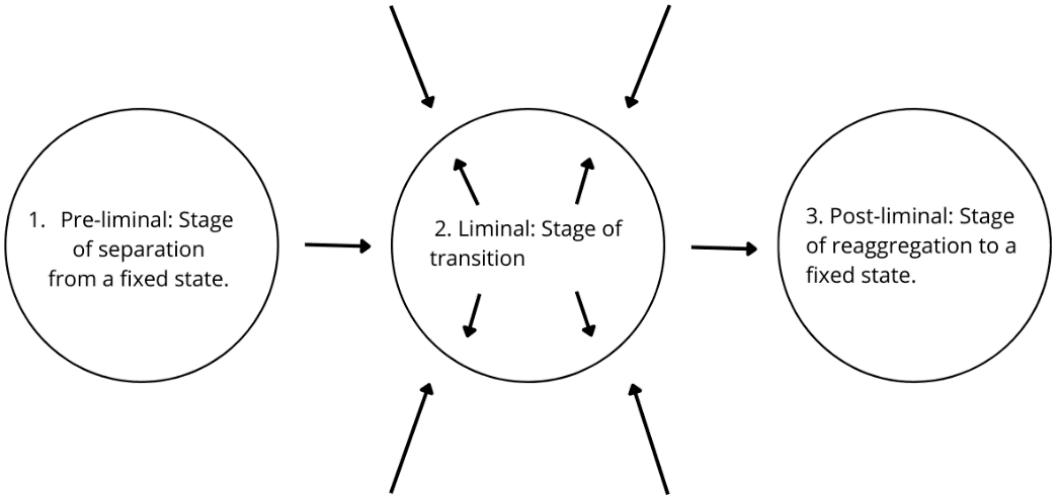

Figure 1.
The middle stage of the process

The middle stage, unlike the other two, is to be conceived of as subject to forces (represented by arrows) arising from the outside and bearing on the limen, as well as to forces emanating from the limen and exerting pressure in a variety of directions, only some of which may come together towards a post-liminal stage. The middle zone shapes a 'subjunctive' system of potentialities, of turbulence and unpredictability, of (as Turner puts it) *as-if*s and *maybe*s: 'The subjunctive, according to Webster's Dictionary, is always concerned with "wish, desire, possibility, or hypothesis"'.[6] We should add to this statement that the subjunctive is also the province of fear, doubt, and the counterfactual. Some such addition is needful because there is too much of a tendency to view the limen one-sidedly as a positive setting naturally conducive to beneficial outcomes.

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

[5] My thanks to Verónica Frejo and Tareixa García de Polavieja for improving my diagrams.

[6] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications 1982), pp. 82-83.

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And when one looks at this system from the perspective of the middle itself, no outcome is assured. We know this because no process takes place in a vacuum. If we assume that a character undertakes, say, a journey displaying all three stages, it will be obvious that other trajectories will cross theirs in the liminal zone; they may have second thoughts; accidents will happen; and new perspectives (opened up precisely by the potential nature of the limen) may affect the process in various ways. The characters may have their own goals in mind, but what we see from our vantage-point as observers is that they have to deal with other individuals, objects, sites and events, and, therefore, that they do not simply *cross* the threshold, rather they *negotiate* a variety of imponderable factors (beginning with the often unexpected width of the limen; see below).[7] We therefore need a model—a visual representation of the event—that will focus on what happens not at the end but *in the course of* this engagement.

Let us take a minimal example. In wondertales, at least two characters are always involved, their narrative arcs coming variously together and apart.[8] This peculiarity is so strongly marked in these tales as to merit being considered a 'law' of the genre, one I have called 'the Law of Double Narrative' (though perhaps 'law' is excessive, and one might prefer to write of a 'principle'). Schematically, the kernel of our model looks as shown in Figure 2:

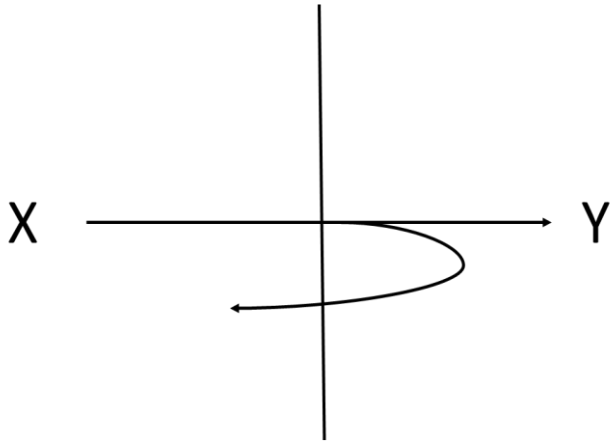

Figure 2.
The Law of Double Narrative.[9]

[7] A study of this concept in fantasy fiction by Elena Bermejo and myself is underway.
[8] By 'wondertales' I will mean *Wundermärchen*, the genre of folktales often (and not quite properly) known as 'fairytales' or 'tales of magic,' that is, the set of narratives identified between numbers 300 and 749 in Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson and Hans-Jörg Uther's standard index *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, 3 vols. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004).
[9] See my 'Reading Liminality,' p. 3.

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These two are, typically, a) the hero who sets out and, after performing a crucial deed, returns and marries the princess, and b) the villain (or an elder brother, or an early would-be hero) who will possibly oppose him, possibly undertake the same adventure, but fail and/or be punished in some Other world with death or imprisonment. Put differently, we have a double narrative in every wondertale. Obviously one of the two trajectories—the hero's—will be invariably made central, but the other one is there too, in the periphery of the hero's. Ignoring this second trajectory will imperil the objectivity of the model.

And the wondertale genre is not a unique case. Manuscripts and sculptures of the 11th through 13th centuries abound in ornaments and decorated initials characterised by convoluted visual patterns and a-centric compositions; the style goes back to the early Anglo-Saxon and Celtic art of the 7th and 8th centuries, as can be illustrated with the intricate pattern of intertwined snakes in the famous belt buckle unearthed at Sutton Hoo:

Figure 3.

Golden belt buckle from the Sutton Hoo ship-burial, 7th century.[10]

A close textual equivalent of this style finds representation in the medieval romance, which plays with two, three or more knights whose paths it braids in a characteristic *interlace* arrangement. The following illustration is taken from Eugene Vinaver's *The Rise of Romance*:[11]

[10] Picture, Michel wal, from Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sutton_Hoo_belt_buckle.jpg

[11] Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (1956; Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1984), p. 78.

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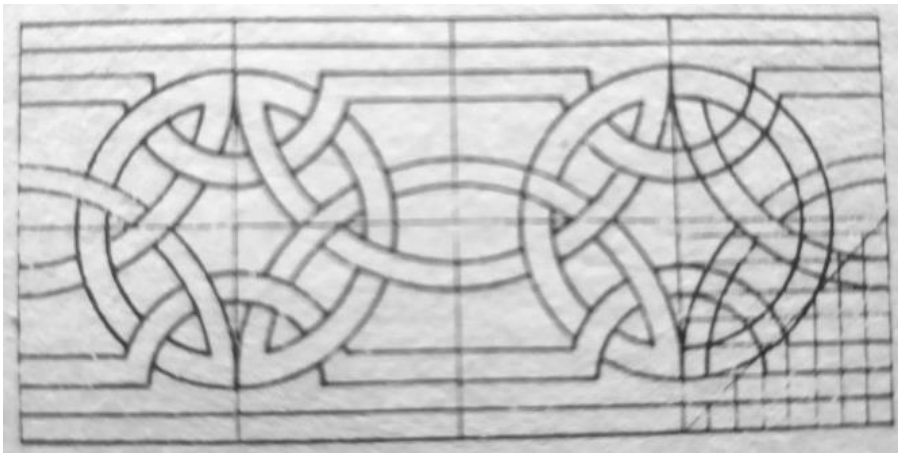

Figure 4.
The interlace pattern

Now, wondertale and romance share with epic and modern novel a determination to interweave numbers of narrative lines (be it only two) which operate as parallels, analogues, complements or mirror images of each other; these provide us with a fabric in which the single thread is inextricably bound to and dependent upon all other threads, generating a complex pattern of lines and junction points (the 'edges' and 'nodes' of a network). A convenient representation of this complexity—one more suitable than the regular, symmetrical pattern of medieval romances, or the extremely predictable design of wondertales—is to be found in the London tube map:

Figure 5.
The London Tube map

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This map outlines a system, understood as an organised array of interconnected elements; and we can use this system analogically to elucidate seven major traits of narrative text:

1. The map constitutes a network;
2. it displays multiple trajectories;
3. it is an open system;
4. it possesses a rhizomatic structure;
5. it is pre-directional;
6. it is a liminal construct;
7. it allows for permanent liminality.

1. *The map shapes a network of routes, junctions and ramifications, points of entry and exit, of departure and destination.*

In narrative, the hero's journey represents one possible pathway (say, the Central Line) in the total diagram; but other lines intersect this and provide multiple points of contact among character arcs. What the diagram gives us is the overall picture rather than just the perspective and concerns of one particular individual.

2. *The map allows for horizontal (Central Line), vertical (Northern Line), circular (Circle Line) and oblique traffic (segments of various lines); important, too, is the fact that every line is bi-directional. This is a network of multiple potential trajectories.*

Similarly, though our conventional western representation of time favours left to right motion, narrative text allows for both flashback and flashforward, simultaneity, alternation, 'forking paths,' or *in medias res*—techniques which Gérard Genette groups under the general category of *anachronies.*[12] It follows that narrative, too, constitutes a network of virtual routes in a multiplicity of directions.

3. *The map constitutes an open system in that it is not self-contained. A three-dimensional version of the diagram would show that at many points it opens to the surface (the street above), to deeper levels of the system, to other comparable systems connected to the tube network (bus depots, railway stations, airports).*

The 'map' of narrative, too, at different points opens to higher levels (hyper- and meta-fiction), to deeper levels (embedded narratives), to other comparable systems (intertexts); this accounts, too, for intergeneric and trans-medial borrowing, adaptation, hybridisation and evolution.

[12] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980), 40.

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4. *The map shapes an a-centric, non-linear, rhizomatic network. No line is prioritised: 'North' and 'South,' 'right' or 'left' are purely locative and lack hierarchical value (though individual travellers will obviously have their own priorities).*[13]

No line or direction is privileged in the total diagram of narrative either, though of course reader, narrator or character can prioritise a given plotline, character arc, theme or course of action.

5. *As befits a rhizome, no direction is standard or obligatory. The system allows for transfer, detour, shortcut, backtrack, re-routing or abandoning the journey.*

The narrative system, too, allows for a character's willing or enforced change of tack, diversion, shortcut, stalling, halting, returning, desisting.

6. *The Underground constitutes a liminal system insofar as it is designed for passage and transit, not for staying in it.*

Narrative, too, constitutes a liminal system insofar as it deals with processes, not with stasis. Given an Aristotelian arrangement of beginnings (pre-liminal stage), middles (liminal) and ends (post-liminal), characters exist in 'the middle,' in transit, occupying a betwixt-and-between condition for much or most of the plot (see below).

7. *This said, though travellers use the tube system to move to some destination, thousands of people are actually employed in the Underground. Officials, maintenance and security personnel work there, buskers earn a living, sellers offer goods, services and commodities; in wartime, its tunnels served as air-raid shelters. If not a site of permanent liminality, it has become one where near-permanent liminality is possible*.[14]

In narrative, frontiersmen, Donor figures or tricksters dwell in the margins in a semi-permanent way. The limen has its own denizens—fairies, aliens, gods—who may enter stable human space. Some narratives will present such entities in full liminal regalia: mysterious, exotic, extraordinary; others will focus squarely on them, generating (for our contemporary readership) the exhilaration (or disquiet) of the paradoxes that crop up whenever the liminal

[13] On rhizomatic structures, see Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Éditions du Minuit, 1980).

[14] Its liminality has often been rendered permanent for certain groups, entities or forces in the cinema: we have an abandoned tube station below which a Martian spaceship lies buried since time immemorial in Roy Ward Baker's *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967); a tribe of passengers stranded in a caved-in section of the Underground since 1892 in Gary Sherman's *Death Line* (1972); a lost train for ever circulating through phantom tunnels in Gustavo Mosquera's *Moebius* (1996); or a predator that has made disused tunnels its lair in Guillermo del Toro's *Mimic* (1997).

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becomes central.[15] Conversely, ordinary characters may be forced, or enticed, to abandon ordinary space and to enter (or cross) the liminal areas. What I am calling 'ordinary space' is simply the territory that each one of us is used to viewing as *familiar*; the non-familiar is for us the liminal. But of course one person's limen may be another's ordinary territory.[16] This is part of a *relativistic* effect directly associated with the fact that limina are not-spaces, 'places that are not places.'

For a more abstract version of the London tube map, let us visualise liminal space as the central circle of Figure 1, and represent train lines schematically as a network of *edges* or links pointing in various directions, crossing each other, generating junction points or *nodes* (vertices) from which new lines may emerge, as in Figure 6:

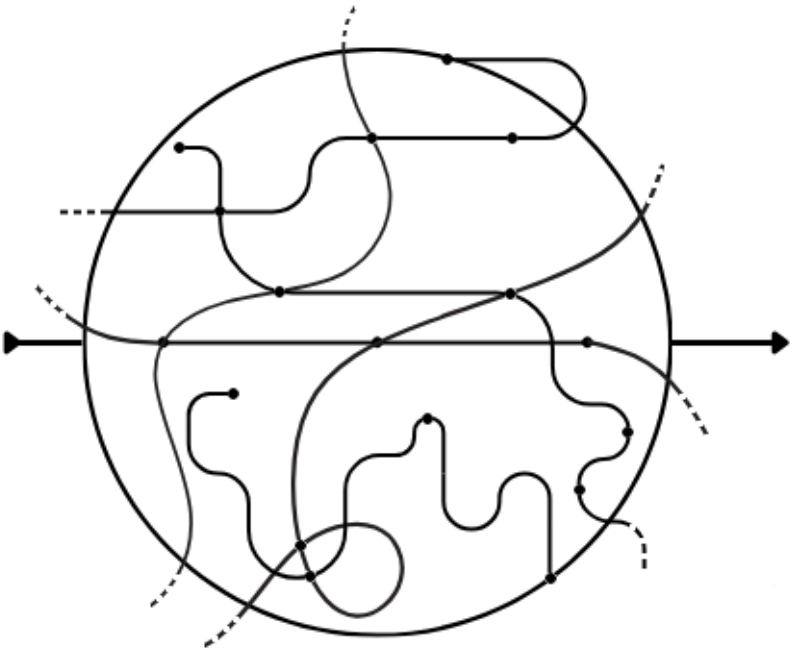

Figure 6.
An abstract model for the liminal stage

The links and nodes intermeshing within the circle stand for possibilities, not for determinate pathways, and signify the potentiality of the limen. To either side of the circle we find definite directional lines of development indicating the pre-liminal and the post-liminal stages. But the liminal stage is much more complex than the other two; it is *pre-directional* in

[15] The human boy raised by beasts (Tarzan, Mowgli), the alien boy raised by humans (Superman), or Emilio Salgari's pirates are cases in point.

[16] As the late Gwyn Thomas put it in the title of his lecture twenty-three years ago, 'Your Margin Is My Centre;' see *A Place That Is Not A Place: Essays in Liminality and Text*, ed. Isabel Soto (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2000), pp. 81-94.

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the sense that we cannot predict the trajectory each of the lines is going to follow, whether left or right, up or down. This is because each line may intersect with an existing node or generate a new one, each node being a potential starting-point for new trajectories. The whole shapes a chaotic system which is so sensitive to initial conditions as to make the direction of any given trajectory unpredictable.[17]

Though the picture will be different for each narrative, all textual realisations of the diagram will consist of some such network of inter-crossing lines that give rise to junction points and shape a threshold zone. It is important to stress that the diagrams in Figures 5 and 6 depict the *middle* of a process (travelling space, narrative space). For each line of development, outcomes are of course expected, end-points will be reached, goals may be achieved, but what is conveyed here is not the particular tale of a single character but a chart of the textual limen, that is, a network of possibilities. Looking at it as a magnification of the Law of Double Narrative, the London tube model reflects the potential—Turner's 'subjunctivity'—rather than the actual. Once we select a starting-point or a destination—once we assume, e.g., that *reaggregation* is the natural purpose of the passage—we collapse the multiformity of the model and handle liminal space as if it were ordinary space.

I will now concentrate on three textual cases that exemplify how beginning, forward direction and closure are not foregone elements in narrative design. I shall begin with the middle, the limen itself, as illustrated in the film *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961).[18] This film contains a glimpse of a plotline: two nameless characters who may have been lovers in the past meet (again, perhaps?) in a nameless luxury spa and talk of eloping; but instead of advancing, this skeleton plot is fragmented and stalled by iterations, mirrorings, loops, flashbacks, parallelisms, mise-en-abyme and other techniques. A labyrinthine environment is configured by regular if varied tracking shots of the same endless corridors, doors, stairs and salons; different takes on the same scene; a voice-over (that of the male protagonist? That of an actor in the play the characters watch at the beginning?) which recalls and repeats but incurs in contradiction (with itself, with the voice of the female protagonist); and mutually incompatible denouements to certain situations: in one scene a man who might be the woman's husband shoots her; in another, her supposed lover falls accidentally to his death before her eyes; a while later, the two are found discussing their elopement. The whole yields a narrative of recurrences and divergences, of plot shunting forwards, backwards and sideways. At the 'end' they seem to be leaving together, but there is no trusting that this is not just one more variation on a flickering theme. Is this the afterlife of damned souls with no clear recollection of their previous lives, doomed to rehearse the same situations to eternity? Various kinds of metalepsis conflate narrative planes (present and past, fact and memory, the actual and the imagined), so that all sense of narrative direction is compromised, and human

[17] I cannot go here into the ramifications of considering the limen a *dynamical complex system*. See Robert Bishop, 'Chaos,' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/chaos/.

[18] Alain Resnais (direction) and Alain Robbe-Grillet (script), *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Cocinor/Cineriz 1961). Available on *Filmin*, https://www.filmin.es/.

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existence becomes an overwhelming threshold zone with no clear beginning, no predictable outcome—an endless middle, a rhizomatic construct of mere possibilities.

It is common to think of roots as the point of departure of a plant; in a rhizome, however, it is the stem that generates both roots and shoots. Narrative being plot (*syuzhet*) rather than story (*fabula*), it can rearrange the temporal sequence of events in a manner that finds no counterpart in the (necessarily linear) rite of passage. The technique of *in medias res*, whereby events belonging to the middle of the plot appear at the outset, is no simple strategy to hold the audience's attention, rather its function is to make clear that the event thus shunted to the forefront is the point of departure of the entire work, all other elements to be measured by reference to it. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* begins in precisely this way, with an ongoing investigation into the causes of the plague that is devastating Thebes.[19] Gradually it will be unveiled—but only at the prompting of Oedipus—that, years before, he killed a man (unaware that he was the king of Thebes, and his own father) and later married the widowed queen of Thebes (not knowing she was that man's wife, and his own mother). Of the infinite series of actions Oedipus must have performed prior to his arrival in Thebes, these are the ones mentioned by Tiresias as the causes of the plague. In other words, *it is the foregrounded middle that sends out and unfolds its own roots*. Prior events are dependent on later ones for significance; trajectories are not mapped out in advance; they emerge, in different directions (backwards as well as forwards), during the liminal stage.

Nor are closures any less contingent than inceptions. In Hemingway's short story 'Cat in the Rain,' a woman sits with her husband in a hotel room.[20] There is an unspoken tension between them; he seems indifferent to her wishes. From their window, through the pouring rain, she sees a cat curled under a table in the square below. She thinks it important to fetch it in from the rain, goes downstairs, converses briefly with the hotel owner (whom she rather likes), walks out and finds the cat is gone. Uncertain, she returns to her room; there she details for her husband some of the things she would like in her life—which include a kitten—but he hardly listens. Then the maid arrives bringing her a cat from the part of the hotel owner—a cat which may or may not be the same the woman saw. The story ends there. Miriam Mandel has commented on this ending that 'nothing is found or resolved, because *not resolving* is the point of the story;' this narrative evinces 'an insistence on remaining within the area of uncertainty and chaos indefinitely; i.e., a refusal to resolve itself into either X or Y.'[21] Closure is thus postponed for keeps, and we are left in a condition of permanent liminality.

From the perspective of those immersed in the middle of the process, both beginnings and endings lose actuality and gain a potential quality; they are apt to become evanescent,

[19] See *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus,* trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 155-251.
[20] Ernest Hemingway, 'Cat in the Rain,' in *In Our Time* (New York: Boni & Liveright 1925), pp. 117-24.
[21] Miriam Mandel, '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, pp. 56, 44, 58.

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manifold, conflicting. Any account that views the narrative process in terms of a given expected origin or outcome will have to ignore key aspects of the examples discussed above, which must then appear failures, aberrations, or exceptions to the rule. Far from being oddities, however, these examples illustrate veritable *patterns* that would seem to recur throughout the history of fiction. The model that will aspire to reflect them accurately must go beyond the one-character plotline and beyond the goal-oriented structure; ultimately, beyond the rite-of-passage analogy. The limen contains no outcome, only the potential for an indefinite number of them; and the transition that takes place on it navigates *possibilities* and is governed by *negotiation*.

In the discussion that followed this talk, several questions were raised; significantly, most of them regarded the applicability of the model. Simon Pritchard suggested that perhaps this model is better suited to experimental fiction than to more traditional, genre narrative. I believe *Oedipus* provides a counter-example (and Hemingway's fiction is not quite an instance of experimental writing—except in the sense that every major writer will prove to have been experimental in their time). But it is probably true to say that, whereas the model is meant to apply to all narrative, certain modes of writing may exploit some of its possibilities more explicitly or thoroughly than others. This said, even the humble wondertale offers at least *two* narrative arcs that differ sharply in their closure (see above); and once it gets its characters into threshold territory, they find themselves in a realm of possibilities for the duration. Admittedly, at the end of the tale these are narrowed down to one single, unfailing moment of closure: 'and they lived happily ever after.' But before that moment, all they have is prospects both hopeful and fearful, and resolution is not a given until it happens. So, whether we deal with genre fiction, classical tragedy, wondertales or postmodernist texts, a network of possibilities would seem to be central to narrative.

A related problem was raised by Verónica Frejo, who asked whether the model would still apply to narratives with one single character, or to those where nothing happens. I believe the single character is no exception. Robinson Crusoe spends over twenty years on a desert island which constitutes his particular liminal space. No other character arcs intersect with his until near the end, but he still has to face a hostile environment in the form of storms, the difficulties of making and preserving fire, building a boat, providing shelter and sustenance for himself, and so on; this means that his personal route is crossed by accident, error, his own conflicting desires, illness, new needs, chance events and, in his own estimation, Providence, as well as the specific (climatic, topographic, biological) conditions that prevail on the island. As for uneventful narratives, it is hard to imagine one where nothing really happens; a narrative without a plot would seem to offer description, not narration.[22]

The Robinson example brings up another issue, that of the *width* of the limen. The concept of a threshold evokes a line under a door separating two spaces; but Robinson's island is

[22] 'Aristotle, it seems, was right to give plot primacy in narrative.' See J. Hillis Miller, 'Narrative,' in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990, 1995), 66-79, p. 71.

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three-dimensional. Does the model work in the case of one-dimensional limina? It is a peculiarity of thresholds that, being no-places, they are not spatial, and are therefore not limited by the laws of space that we are familiar with. Still, the kind of generality one would like to attribute to the model requires that we ask whether it can cope with a mere line. In his discussion of what he calls *rites de marge*, 'rites of the margin,' Van Gennep makes quite clear that they are commonly carried out whenever a passage is to be undertaken,

> not only in the case of a country or a territory, but also in the case of a village, a town, a city quarter, a temple, a house. It's only that the neutral zone contracts gradually until it is no more […] than a simple stone, a lintel, a threshold.[23]

Such a 'contraction' does not cancel the potentiality of the limen; whether an entire region, a frontier or a simple door, the liminal area—*la zone neutre*—retains its danger and its promise. Jewish tradition considers leaving or entering the home a hazardous enterprise, its dangers to be warded off by a threshold ritual of touching or kissing a blessed object (the *mezuzah*) affixed to the doorpost; and in the early twentieth century a practice was introduced in the Catholic world of attaching a Sacred Heart image to the door of the home, which the person entering or leaving is expected to similarly touch and kiss. Both practices assign to the threshold (or to the deity presiding over it) an active power which may or not be beneficial and which therefore has to be conciliated by appropriate ritual behaviour.

Another reflection from Pritchard touched upon how some such dynamical model might supply a clue as to the special pleasure that we experience in, as he put it, 're-visiting' a film or book. Even though we know the denouement, we love to lose ourselves again in the labyrinth of the characters' lives and to pretend that we do not know where it leads; we suspend not only our disbelief but our knowledge too, in order to relish once again the uncertainty of the complication. At least part of our enjoyment in re-visiting familiar texts derives from the theoretical inexhaustibility of the limen. Fiction being, as it were, a mirror held up to life, it has survival value; we feel the urge to explore as many pathways as we can because our own lives are filled with the uncertainty—to twist Robert Frost's metaphor—of so many possible roads-that-can-be-taken.[24]

Tareixa García de Polavieja posed the logically ultimate question, whether this analysis implies that *all narrative is liminal*. For an answer (and I must confess that what follows is somewhat tentative), I need to conceive of the *textual field* as a two-dimensional surface, a 'map' where everything—texts, genres, media—seems fixed, stable (as is actually the case for most of us, most of the time).[25] Now let us superimpose on it a lens which has this

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[23] *[…] non seulement quand il s'agit d'un pays ou d'un territoire, mais aussi d'un village, d'une ville, d'un quartier de ville, d'un temple, d'une maison. Mais alors la zone neutre se rétrécit progressivement, jusqu'à n'être […] qu'une simple pierre, qu'une poutre, qu'un seuil.* Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (1909; Paris: Picard, 1991), 25 (my translation).

[24] 'The Road Not Taken,' in *Robert Frost: Selected Poems* (1955; Harmondsworth: Penguin 1966), 78.

[25] Concepts such as *textual field* (the system shaped by oral, written, printed, filmed and digital texts as well as the genres and media these enter into) will be defined and explained in a forthcoming group paper.

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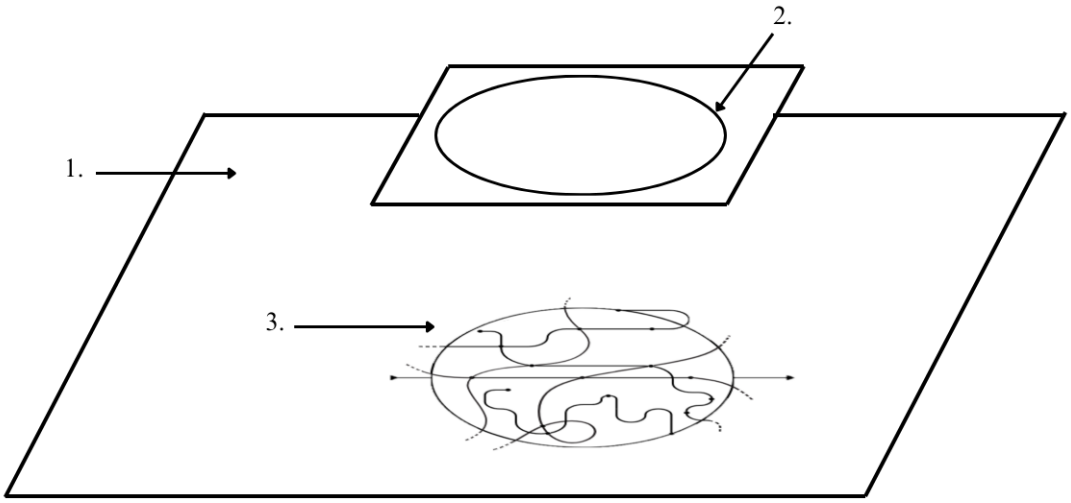
property, that it reveals what the map does not show: the energy, the lines of force, a dynamics in whatever part of the map we look at through the lens. I will call this lens the *plane of transition*.[26] It may be thought of as a powerful microscope that brings out unsuspected complexity in the object it focuses on; for our purposes, this microscope detects movement, a condition of permanent flux in apparently static, unchanging things. As we displace our lens over the map, different sections of it will be highlighted and appear then as regions pulsing with activity and change.[27]

Now, the plane of transition—our moveable lens—hovers over the textual field. The region of the field which happens to be found under the lens at a given point in time will be liminal par rapport to neighbouring regions which are not covered by it, and so it will display liminal traits—fundamentally, a dynamics which we may visually translate as the circle that stands for the liminal zone in Figure 6, containing a network of edges and nodes. We can now state the following principle: *liminality is a function of objects that find themselves under the plane of transition*. This is really a fancy way of saying that liminality emerges only when we 'project' a limen onto an object; in yet plainer words, limina are not there independently of an observer. This I have attempted to reflect in Figure 7:



1. Textual field
2. Plane of transition
3. Region of the field observed through the plane of transition

Figure 7.
The *plane of transition* and the textual field

[26] In mathematics, a *phase plane* or *state plane* is the graph that depicts all the possible states a two-dimensional system can exhibit in time; what my 'plane of transition' intends to convey is no more than a schematic impression of the multiplicity of possible states and trajectories a liminal zone can harbour.
[27] Of course, we cannot see the whole field with our lens, only a portion of it at a time. To grasp change we need to approach it relative to something which, for the time being, appears to remain unchanged. The problem lies not in the instrument—the lens—but in our limited ability to see in time.

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Many individuals, at many points in time, have conceived of life as a journey, or a road, or a river, or a pilgrimage, or a fleeting dream—in other words, as a transitory and, therefore, liminal event. Does that mean that there is no other way of looking at life? Assuredly there is; but are they then deceived? Not really; it is a matter of how each of them approaches existence through the lens of personal or communal *experience*; as experience varies, so do our conceptions and images of life. The question, 'Is all narrative liminal?' can now be answered as follows: liminality is—among other things—a device, a tool that we resort to in order to bring out certain specific features of the object under investigation. As we move on to examine other objects, or other aspects of the object, the initial one ceases to display the kind of dynamic intensity it had when viewed under the plane of transition. Read against a background of nineteenth-century short stories, Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain' exhibits pure liminality; compared to, say, some postmodernist fictions, it reads like a fairly ordinary story, with the offer of a cat even possibly functioning as a proper token of closure. By this logic, liminality can be 'detected' in any text, but only as a relativistic effect that depends on a number of factors: observer, purpose, timescale, directionality, cultural group, historical moment, and language (see below).

Among these factors, a key one is point of view, or, as Celia Marqués noted in the debate, *perspective*. As our lens hovers over a different section of the field, we lose sight of the dynamic intensity of other sections. But of course this does not go without advantages. For one thing, *not* looking through the plane of transition allows us to see inceptions, endings, meanings, precisely those elements that are problematised by a liminalist perspective. Revisiting two familiar texts, I am struck by the strange coincidence of their endings. The one is *Hamlet*, at the point where Horatio announces:

> And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
> How these things came about. So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause, (or 'forced cause,')
> And in this upshot purposes mistook
> Fallen on th' inventors' heads. All this can I
> Truly deliver.
>
> (*Hamlet* 5.2.363-70)

The editors of *Hamlet* in the Arden Shakespeare series point out that '[s]everal critics have found the vagueness and generality of this account unsatisfactory: Horatio fails to give the onstage audience any of the specific details […] that are known to the theatre audience or reader.'[28] Since Horatio promises to give details later (and Fortinbras understands it thus when he replies 'Let us haste to hear it'), I believe his preliminary account fulfils its function well. Horatio can 'deliver' this because, released from a labyrinth of expectations, suspicions,

[28] *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Cengage Learning, 2006), 462.

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plots and counterplots, he can now see roots and outcomes, and summarise with hindsight what was 'accidental,' what 'unnatural,' what 'casual,' what 'mistook.' In other words, he can—but only after the fact—see the paths that the various personages had taken, reason out 'how these things came about,' and assess their final (and, in most cases, hardly intended) results. In my terms, he has stopped looking through the lens and can 'sum things up.'

The other title is a riposte to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. At the end of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a desperate 12-year-old Ralph runs for his life from children turned feral savages; they have already killed two boys and are now out for his blood; quite unexpectedly, Ralph stumbles against a British officer—an adult just arrived on the island—and then, in sudden awareness, bursts into tears:

> And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.[29]

In both texts, a 'summary' of experience is offered at the end; but it is also much more than that. Having extricated themselves from their respective labyrinths, both characters now possess a clarity of vision that allows them to see both the end and the routes that led to it, as well as the 'roads not taken.' There are no more maybes to be tracked, shunned, or deciphered, there are just facts, assessments, insight. They have each traversed their particular limen, but only now does it make (tragic) sense. Unless we focus on the threshold we will not perceive its dynamics; but only by quitting it do we gain the perspective that it otherwise denies us.

One key to the whole issue of perspective is to be found in focalisation, the position and attitude from which we are invited to look at a given element, character, event or site in the text.[30] Lexicon and syntax, free indirect style and other essentially linguistic devices orientate the way readers assess such elements; in a sense, the lens, what I have called the plane of transition, may be no more than the focalising instrument writers employ to direct our gaze. It is, e.g., because of a certain style that we see the wife in Hemingway's story as moving in liminal ground; even though we only perceive what she does and says (hardly—at least explicitly—what she thinks), we are led to assume, through what Genette (1980: 189-94) calls 'external focalisation,' that she faces a situation over which she has little power or control, and of the outcome of which she has no inkling beyond her own wishes (whereas, for other characters, routes may be well mapped out). This can be considered a case of forces (her husband, the hotel owner, the maid) from outside the limen bearing down upon the character in it. Other forces that impinge upon—that liminalise—her particular route 'from the outside' are conventions: natural (the rain helps create a transitory, destabilising environment) and cultural (hotels tend to be seen as temporary, halfway sites).

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[29] William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954; London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 223.

[30] In the composition of these final reflections I am particularly indebted to Ineke Jolink, who made very useful suggestions to a draft of this paper, specifically as regards perspective.

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One further caveat as regards focalisation. A character such as the hotel owner is admittedly not liminal: he works, perhaps lives there, so to him the hotel may be part of his comfort zone. But the story is written in such a way as to prevent us from seeing the wife as entering the hotel owner's space (even though, 'objectively' speaking, this is precisely the case: she and her husband are guests there); rather it is the hotel owner who 'enters' the wife's path. As he does so, he appears to orbit her world and to become part of her liminal space. It pertains to the relativity of the limen that the same narrative space can be a stable site for some, liminal for others. It is worth restating that liminality is a function projected upon a site (*a fortiori*, upon a person, object, event, and so forth); the site exists in its own right, but the liminal quality that we discern in it is adventitious, contingent; it might not be there. When we speak of a limen we fuse site and function into one concept; thereafter, it is common to assume that they go naturally together, that certain sites *are* liminal by rights. But liminality is never an essence. Cultural convention may persuade us that a hotel *is* liminal space; but is it so for everyone, including permanent residents, the staff who work there, the hotel owner who lives there?

What I hope to have produced here is a sketch of a model for the study of the limen—a map of the threshold. The following run-down of it may be useful:

1) I postulate a textual field, and a plane of transition that hovers above it; viewed through this plane of transition, we glimpse each given point in the field as liminal territory.

2) The liminal appears as a dynamic, two-dimensional network of possibilities;[31] multiple inter-crossing trajectories obtain there which are apt to be redirected at junction points. In this 'space that is no space,' characters do not simply cross the threshold, they negotiate it.

3) The network is open to other networks; it is pre-directional, eschews hierarchies and displays a rhizomatic structure; the whole has a provisional quality, but permanent occupation of the limen is to be contemplated as an option.

4) The model focuses a) on the aggregate of characters that occupy or visit the limen, rather than on single individuals; b) on the 'topography' of the limen itself, its accidents and forces; c) on the transition that all process consists in, rather than on its inception or end.

5) Viewed from within the limen, and in light of its 'subjunctive' status, beginnings, goals and outcomes are contingent: they depend on a variety of factors—and not only, and not necessarily, upon the actions of a given character—that can direct and redirect processes; the fact that to move on the limen involves a *negotiation* makes outcomes

[31] Since time factors are to be slotted into the general picture, this is bound to be a four-dimensional construct, a Bakhtinian *chronotope*.

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uncertain. The desirability of a particular end matters to the agents involved, not to the model itself.

6) A key trait of the model, hence, is its *atelicity*, its *not* tending towards a given endpoint.

7) The one-dimensional, width-less line is the end result of a process of contraction of the limen; or, conversely, it can be viewed as the starting point in a process of expansion. Not being a 'place,' the limen is unconstrained by the laws of space, and can expand, contract, vanish or encroach upon ordinary space.

8) The liminality of an object or site is dependent upon timescale, directionality, historical moment, individual and cultural perspective. As the plane of transition is displaced over the textual field, what appeared a matrix of possibilities resolves into a clear line of development towards some specifiable goal; in turn, other points on the field reveal their own dynamic potential under the plane of transition.

To conclude, the anthropological approach to rites of passage builds on an *emic* model of process insofar as it takes into account the motivations and goals of individual participants in the rite, their point of view as manifested in purposes and conscious actions, their 'We do this in order to achieve a given result.' What the present paper offers is an *etic* model designed to encompass all participants in the process as well as the topographies of the territory they venture into, not the preferences or values of particular individuals or groups.[32] Specifically, it is *atelic* in that it attends to the nature itself of the limen and its negotiation by individuals, rather than to what is or is not expected to happen at the end of the process, after the 'crossing' of the threshold. This model should in principle be applicable to all narrative, and that includes narrative accounts of non-textual events. The present paper is a first step in the direction of building a suitable narratological model of the limen.

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[32] For the terms 'emic' and 'etic' (coined on the templates of 'phonemic' and 'phonetic'), see Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behaviour*, 2nd edn (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), chapter 2.

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