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READING LIMINALITY

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Reading Liminality

Manuel Aguirre

This paper claims that at least certain kinds of ethnographic evidence can be *read* and interpreted as textual matter, and that a 'reading' will highlight important aspects of the liminal not easily brought out by ethnographic models. The notion of 'reading' the limen is of course indebted to Clifford Geertz's seminal *text analogy* for social events (Geertz 1973: 9-10). Five such aspects will be outlined in the form of propositions, and illustrated with examples drawn from ritual, folklore, literature, film, cartography, and political geography. Behind these propositions lies the search for a theory of liminality that will do justice to the complexity of the textual field.¹

The three stages of *rites de passage* were identified by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner as follows: 1. *pre-liminal*, the stage of separation; 2. *liminal*, the stage of initiation (conducted on a threshold or *limen*, which Turner famously defined as 'a place that is not a place'); and 3. *post-liminal*, involving 'reaggregation' to the social world.² Although this is a widely respected framework, it may be fostering a mystique around the concept of the limen—a mystique which a 'textual' approach to ritual might help correct.³ This tripartite classification closely corresponds to Aristotle's structuring of the plot of drama into a

¹ This paper began as a short talk read at the conference *(De)Writing the Borderland: Human and Non-Human Liminal Identities*, held at the Universities of Vigo and Santiago on 13-14 January 2022; a revised version was read in the Transitions Seminar sponsored by the LIMEN Research Group at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid on 18 February 2022. I am indebted to the group for feedback, and particularly to Ineke Jolink, Celia Marqués, Beatriz Sánchez and Isabel Soto for several insights and caveats; all errors are my own. 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.

² Van Gennep (1909: 27); Turner (1969: 94-7). Turner (and many another author) here mistranslates the French of Van Gennep's *agrégation*, which implies incorporation to a *new* or renewed world—without which the ritual fails of its purpose.

³ Turner (1974: 38-42) proposed a second model for what he called *social drama*, and allowed for 'Schism' by the side of 'Reaggregation'. We will see that Schism does not solve our problem either.

beginning, a middle, and an end.⁴ The 'middle' segment of the plot is our liminal stage; and the fact that Aristotle defines this middle as 'that which follows something else, and is itself followed by something' means it has no independent existence: the middle is 'parasitic' upon the other two, and yet (and precisely because of this) it is the crucial segment in the plot. The ethnographers borrowed from the critic an arrangement of events which has all the makings of a *narrative* construction. My interest lies in how a 'readable' approach—handling the liminal as if it were textual matter—brings out aspects of it which the application of anthropological models might leave unexplored.

Let me begin with a practical illustration of how addressing the liminal as *textual* matter casts light on the complexity of the threshold. Two boys belonging to a traditional tribe undertake a ritual initiation journey into the wilderness. One of them succeeds, reaches his goal, returns to his tribe, and is hailed a man. The other cannot overcome the hardships of the journey, and dies. If we follow the *separation-initiation-reaggregation/schism* model, we will be telling ourselves the narrative of the survivor only. What is called for here is an account of the fates of both participants (the 'passengers', as Turner calls them) and an acknowledgment that the limen—the wilderness—is as dangerous as it is promising, that it can defeat as much as it can empower; hence, too, that the actions performed by the initiands do not exhaust the event, and account must be taken also of the intrinsic properties of the limen.

My example was an invented one, but it reflects an issue that is explicitly addressed in folk narrative. Wondertales time and again tell the story of three brothers who set out on a quest; the eldest botch their mission and get stuck or die, the youngest alone succeeds. Folklorist Max Lüthi has observed that

[t]hose who are exposed to danger can naturally perish in it; but they can also grow in it. [Wondertales] present both possibilities, metaphorically and highly stylised, to our mind's eye (Lüthi 1962: 66; see also 143).

Another way of formulating this is to say that the wondertale tells two stories simultaneously: that of the successful hero, and that of his 'other', represented by secondary characters—companion, failed hero, antagonist, villain. A model suited to the complexities of literary texts should incorporate what one could venture to call a *Law of Double Narrative* that will allow for failure and loss as possible outcomes of the liminal experience, as illustrated in Figure 1.⁵

⁴ Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, 7. See Turner 1982: 72; Brook 2018: 16.

⁵ That there exist rigid constraints on the way we tell stories was proposed long ago by Axel Olrik (1921), whose *epic laws of folk narrative* are generally acknowledged by folklorists as a valid tool in research.

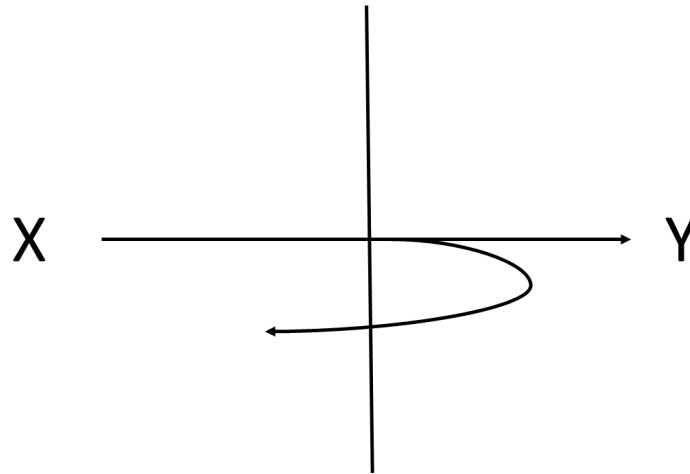


FIGURE 1. The Law of Double Narrative.

If the vertical line stands for the threshold into the realm of wonder (a point to be qualified later), the path of the returning hero is represented by the curving arrow that ventures in, then out of that realm (X—Y—X); while the trajectory of his 'other' is signalled by the straight arrow which vanishes in the otherworld (X—Y).⁶ Narrative, as Gerald Prince (1987: 60) points out, 'does not simply mirror what happens; it explores and devises what can happen'. This means that *potentiality* is inscribed in all narrative text. All fiction is then liminal inasmuch as it depicts an unsettled event—a Schrödinger's cat, a Borgesian garden of forking paths.

I will be relativising such universal statements at the end of this paper. For now, let me take a real-life case. The Mediterranean Sea has become a threshold for multitudes of Africans who embark on a journey of transformation, in most cases either to be returned to their place of origin or to perish.⁷ A presupposition of the standard anthropological model is that participants involved in either ritual or social drama are initially engaged in a status-quo situation, a *state*, which Turner (1969: 94) defines in contrast to *transition* as 'any kind of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognised,' 'a fixed point in the social structure, [or] a set of cultural conditions'—something which smacks of a social contract: individuals comply with its obligations and enjoy its benefits. This is not what we find in the case of migrants, many of whom do not start out from a stable, fixed 'state' of normality; on the contrary, a threshold condition of dispossession had been their lot way before they decided to depart, and Africa held for them no place that they could call a place. The premise which defines the stage of separation is not recoverable here.

⁶ This 'law' can be found at work in wondertale, epic, tragedy and novel alike. See Aguirre (2007: 37).

⁷ A dramatised testimony of this is found in Marcel Barrena's recent film *Mediterráneo* (2021).

Literary equivalents make this plain. In speaking of an individual or group who *detach themselves* from a fixed condition, we presuppose that they formerly enjoyed the benefits of that state from which they have seceded; but this will not go for the protagonists of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for they have no recognisable starting point: their first-person narratives begin *in medias res*, and they have always existed in that no-man's ground. In their cases there is no recognisable 'stable or recurrent condition' in which they would have been integrated to begin with. Like these fiction characters, migrants may already live in a threshold situation by the time the stage of separation commences—a topological oddity that will require our attention later.

Nor do North-African and Middle-Eastern migrants who manage to secure a foothold in Europe in the twenty-first century come to be 'reaggregated' to a new, fixed, contractual state on arrival: the outcome of their passage hardly counts as an instance of (re)aggregation, if only because effective integration remains problematic for most of them. What this argues is that, whereas the liminal stage is a downright relevant concept here (migrants exist in a betwixt-and-between condition for the duration), the criteria of the pre-liminal and post-liminal stages are not met in many or most cases.

Of course this shows the limitations of the concepts of both ritual and social drama: they cover activities accepted and regulated by the community, and cannot apply to events caused by predatory practices on the part of outside agents or by natural disaster or climate change, events over which the community has little or no control. In these latter instances, the group to which the 'passengers' belong has neither sanctioned nor regulated the event. Ritual and social drama models were not designed to comprehend these phenomena. On the other hand, it would seem that an account of them in terms of a textual model is possible. I turn to what is arguably the most persuasive of these to date, Joseph Campbell's theory of the *monomyth*, modelled explicitly on Van Gennep's account.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Campbell claimed that all narratives in the world are ultimately flexions of one single master narrative, the tale of life itself, centred on the hero who stands for all of us. Its nuclear structure essentially consists in 'a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage', to wit, 'a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return' (Campbell 1949: 31, 35). The three-stage scheme is familiar: 1) Departure of the hero; 2) adventure (struggle, obstacles, tests, achievement); and 3) return. This (again, Aristotelian) breakdown is handy if we wish to account for plot; and provision is made for failure and non-return, since in Campbell's terms it is the essence of the pattern that it will be subjected to all manner of variation.⁸ However, it still does not account for history's countless victims of slavery, war

⁸ Campbell begins, e.g., by acknowledging (58-65) that world narratives teem with characters who *refuse* to heed the summons to adventure. One can stretch the type to encompass numberless instances of characters who seek but fail to accomplish their quest.

and forced migration. Furthermore, reducing narrative to these three components ignores a crucial datum which contemporary critics are in possession of, namely, that a text involves not only characters and events but also narrator, reader, author, singer or storyteller, translator, interpreter, editor, publisher, critic. All of these 'voices' condition the narrative—*our* interpretation of the narrative—in various ways; so do the nature and characteristics of the territories and stages implicated in the journey. The variety and complexity of the factors that contemporary literary theory has brought to light renders this model, too, overly simplistic for our purposes.

Nevertheless, Campbell's is a useful starting point, for the fact is that we only know of Mediterranean migrations through textual constructs such as film, journalistic report, rumour, or fiction; and any such account is always a *narrative*. Now, an application of the 'law' of double narrative reveals that, however much sympathy we Europeans may display towards the migrants, *we* fill the protagonist slot in this tale, *they* the slot of our counterparts. Furthermore, our role as characters is privileged, for we are also readers: we are the people on this shore of the Mediterranean, whole societies of beach-goers who observe *and interpret* the immigrants' recurrent attempts to land. Which means that it is not they but we who control this text, and so we turn out to be not only characters and readers but also narrators, and we assign to the migrants the role of our Other: failed heroes, victims, antagonists—why do we fear them? Perhaps because, in *our* account, they are cast in the role of villains.⁹

If so, we do not simply act in, read, and narrate the event, for there may be yet a further textual role for us: the European Union is also, at least in part, responsible for their plight. Our culture has a vested interest in the construction of this duplicitous threshold that the Mediterranean has become—an anisotropic limen which disports different properties depending on the direction from which it is viewed (Aguirre 2008a), and which thereby elicits different readings. To them the sea is a doorway fraught with promise (and danger); to us it is our rightful heritage (*Mare nostrum*), which happens to be threatened from outside, and to defend which policing measures must be taken. In ignoring this dimension of the narrative we construct, we may be abdicating our responsibilities as *authors*.

I have postulated that a 'readable' account of the limen forces us to examine not merely the plot but also the actors and 'voices' involved, as well as the multiple flexions of the three stages, and in particular the shapes and dynamics of the threshold itself; and that it is in narrative that we stand to encounter the threshold at its most complex, because narrative, particularly literary narrative, is the field where *all* options are explored. And so, examining the limen through the literary lens may be one way of demystifying it. I will now discuss a few examples that illustrate some of the complex forms of the liminal that a *reading* yields,

⁹ Of course migrants have their own tale to tell, one where the distribution of roles will undoubtedly differ from this; but ours, not theirs, is the hegemonic narrative that circulates in Europe.

and submit five propositions which may be useful in the construction of a theory of liminality suited to the textual field, particularly to narrative.

PROPOSITION 1. *The limen is inflected.*

I borrow a term from grammar to signify not so much a standard recognisable object that can undergo various modifications, as the (open) paradigm of forms it consists in; identifying the dynamic nature of an object that can appear in different shapes, *inflexion* is a convenient technical term to designate a major characteristic of the liminal (Aguirre 2004). Turner (1969) pointed out that liminality is the condition of that which falls between categories, that which pre-exists or eschews classification, the interstitial, the in-between. I would add that liminality may equally be the condition of that which straddles two or more orders, categories, places, times, or forms: the hybrid, the polyvalent, the multiform. This formulation helps us to account for a peculiarity of ballads, wondertales, oral epics and myths. These genres of folk narrative exist only as open-ended sets of versions—as multiforms. In a traditional ballad, for instance, there is no original, definitive, or true form; its versions stand, as it were, with a foot on either side of a line—a line which runs *through* it: the ballad is liminal inasmuch as it exists on both (actually, on multiple) sides of the threshold that defines it—it straddles itself. I have tried to illustrate this in Figure 2:

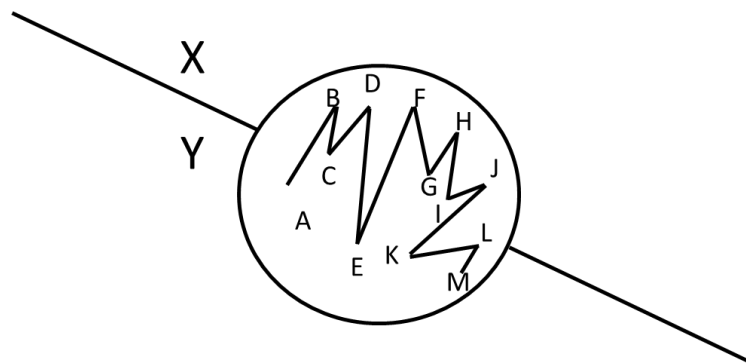


FIGURE 2. The multiform.

Two books such as Joyce's *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* exist (so the thinking goes) as autonomous, unique texts X and Y, even though a relationship of precursor-to-final-work is recognised between them. The 'line' that divides them specifies their separate identities: it is, let us say, its fealty to nineteenth-century novel conventions that defines the first vis-à-vis the Modernist strategies of the second. By contrast, while acknowledging the sixteen versions Francis James Child collected of the ballad 'The Braes o Yarrow' (Child 214), the folklorist does not speak of sixteen independent ballads but of a single one existing in a plurality of textual (and musical) forms modulated by singer, audience, collector, and community. The schematic zigzag line (which simplifies what may

actually amount to a labyrinthine criss-cross pattern) I adapt from Sandor Klapcsik, who uses it, following Deleuze and Guattari (1980), to describe rhizomatic motions and nomadic existence:

The wanderings of the nomads, the movements of tribes are liminal in a postmodern sense because they permanently inhabit a space between two fixed points and it is their movement that defines and constitutes boundaries, not the other way around (Klapcsik 2012: 18-19).¹⁰

This seems a particularly fruitful model for the 'wanderings' of ballad form, which in both performance (from one occasion to another) and geographical displacement (from one audience to another) undergoes large and small variations; and it is these variations that conform the boundary of a particular ballad (here represented by the circle that envelops all versions and trajectories). This 'boundary' which distinguishes it from all other ballads is the same that separates Joyce's two novels, only the ballad boundary *contains* (or better, *is shaped by*) the sum of its versions—it is inflected. To say this is to say not only that the ballad occurs now in this, now in that form, but that its 'natural' state is multiformity.

PROPOSITION 2. *Thresholds tend to acquire width.*

This amounts to a second type of inflexion. A threshold is not a space but a coordinate line, a limit between spaces—it is 'essentially an emptiness'.¹¹ Not being a space, it cannot be conceived of as limited; therefore, it has no boundaries. Hence nothing prevents it from expanding. It is in this sense that we have to understand Mephistopheles in Marlowe's drama when he explains to Faustus the condition in which devils exist: 'where we are is Hell,/ And where Hell is there must we ever be' (*Doctor Faustus* B-text, II.i.125-6). Being no-place, Hell is all places to its prisoners. Milton's Satan describes his flight from God in the same manner: 'Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?/ Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell' (*Paradise Lost* IV:73-5). One possible inflexion of the limen consists in expansion.

¹⁰ Nomads might not follow exactly the same paths or visit the same precise spots every time; hence, trajectories and 'fixed points' may vary.

¹¹ I owe this insight to Ineke Jolink (personal e-mail communication, June 5 2022).

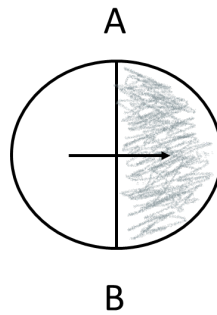


FIGURE 3. The expanding threshold

If the threshold is line AB in Figure 3, characters moving ‘across’ it from the left may find themselves not so much on the *other* side of AB as *in* the shaded territory which constitutes an *expansion of* AB; instead of crossing the limen they *enter* it (Figure 1 should be reinterpreted accordingly: the threshold into the realm of wonder *is* that realm). In Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820: 257), a character despairs of being able to escape the Spanish monastery where he is imprisoned: ‘I may, by your assistance, traverse those intricate passages [...] I may emerge into the light, ascend and descend the wall, but, after that, how am I to escape? [...] All Spain is but one great monastery—I must be a prisoner every step that I take’. Such limina are apt to engulf those who enter them. Sometimes, too, the threshold ‘expands backwards’, as it were, beginning *before* the stage of separation commences; this reflection accounts for how certain individuals (migrants being a case in point) may find themselves in a pre-liminal situation which already displays liminal characteristics such as long-lasting deprivation (see above, p. 4).

The US Frontier was both a line (the edge of settled areas fronting the wilderness) *and* the entire region to the west of this line: an ambiguous domain which expanded and invited entrance, exploration, and conquest. In an alternative formulation (Frederick Turner 1893: 3), the Frontier was ‘the outer edge of the wave’. Since, with characteristic ambiguity, this ‘edge’ is both line and territory, such a wording once again makes the wilderness part of (‘the outer edge of’) US civilisation.¹² The motto of the TV series *Star Trek*— ‘Space, the final frontier’—similarly views the outside (outer space) as but an extension of the boundary, and the boundary as merely the outer edge of what it delimits. Looking at the wilderness not as the *other* side but as *part of* the border—of *our* border—makes all the difference for an expansionist policy. The threshold is thus not an objective line but a perspectivised construct which in these cases is inflected in the service of geopolitical interests.

¹² Mark how the civilising impulse is assigned a dynamic quality whereas the territory flooded by its ‘wave’ is inert or quiescent; using the terms of Gestalt psychology, we might say, first, that the figure *invades* the ground, and second, that in this event no Gestalt shift is thought possible (unlike in the case of the Rubin vase) whereby we might look at the ground *as figure*.

PROPOSITION 3. *Liminality results in, or is the outcome of, replication.*

Here is another type of expansion. In *mise-en-abyme* constructions—the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, the novel-within-the-novel in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*—the embedded narrative resembles the frame narrative in some crucial respect; both the embedded and the frame worlds are liminalised as a result, by which I mean that they are rendered contingent on one another and acquire an unstable, for-the-nonce quality: as they lose autonomy and their ontological status is lowered, each turns into a 'version' of the other—a situation similar to that which obtains in the ballad multiform.¹³

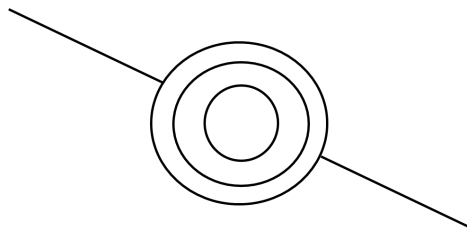


Figure 4.- *Mise-en-abyme* structure.

The engulfing hell of Satan's endless fall (see above) predictably reduplicates itself: 'Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;/ And in the lowest deep a lower deep/ Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide' (*Paradise Lost* IV: 75-77). In certain works of fantasy, crossing the threshold becomes a self-replicating process which may never end, again placing the individual in a potentially endless liminal position (Bermejo 2022). Certain formations in nature characterised by self-similarity on different levels nowadays receive the appellation of fractals. The word 'fractal' was coined to convey the peculiarity that such forms display *fractions* of dimension. A coastline is a *line*, not a surface; but, because of its sinuous shape and repeated convolutions at different magnifications, its length is measured at somewhere between 1 and 2 dimensions (Mandelbrot 1975, Ch. 2)—another example of the expansive line. A different version is the Cretan labyrinth in which a single linear corridor stretches and 'repeats' itself until it 'fills' an entire surface.

The narrative technique of phasing similarly unfolds an event into several episodes of itself—another type of (partial) self-replication. In Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1795), Ellena, seeking to escape from the convent where she is imprisoned, retrieves a secret note from her lover with utmost difficulty and risk, takes it to her cell and, in her eagerness to read

¹³ Note how *mise-en abyme* invites us readers to a parallel reflection regarding our own presumed autonomy: we enter an expanding circle of ontological contingency.

it, drops her only candle; an hour passes before a friend comes with another light so she can read it; she now must follow the written instructions detailing a complex number of steps some of which will have to be corrected on the go. It takes fifteen agonising pages for Ellena to exit the convent, and her troubles have only begun. The phasing of the adventure into a series of tasks, often graded in difficulty, reifies ordinary narrative space into a liminal region which protracts arrival, achievement or escape and disorients (and often terrifies) characters and readers (Aguirre 2002).

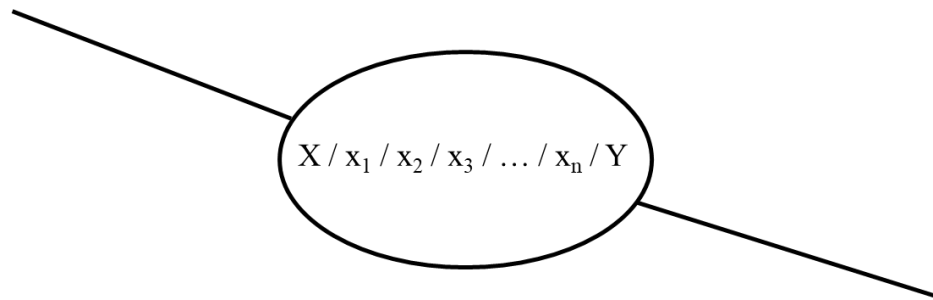


FIGURE 5.- Phasal structure.

A different kind of self-replication appears when a limen is detected, say, on the level of setting of place in a text, and then characters approaching this limen turn out to enjoy a liminal condition themselves. James Fennimore Cooper's frontiersman Natty Bumppo is of European ancestry but was raised by the Indians. El Cid is an exile, a *miles limitaneus*, a 'frontier soldier' operating in liminal territory. The Greek hero Digenes Akrites, 'The Twyborn Borderer', protects the Byzantine frontier against the Arabs, but has Arab blood (Mavrogordato 1999). An interplay of thresholds on different narrative levels in Melville's *Benito Cereno* systematically problematises binaries (Soto 2022). I have argued elsewhere that Gothic fiction plies liminality on the levels of setting, plot, diction, character, theme, and genre (Aguirre 2008b). Correlation of such phenomena reveals that liminal 'space' is perhaps nothing but a system of echoes: not being precisely definable, the limen defines itself on multiple, self-similar levels.¹⁴ Another proposition follows from this:

PROPOSITION 4. *The limen has no fixed nature.*

As it can expand, and multiply, so it can contract, waver, vanish. No essentialist value is to be attached to the threshold, rather it is an experiential and historical construct.

¹⁴ It is tempting to speculate that the cultural domain Jean Baudrillard (1981) describes as governed by the 'precession of simulacra' is a *liminal* dystopia which consists of nothing but reflections without an original, a system of thresholds that has usurped real cultural space.

Experiential, in that it cannot be defined independently of the individuals who move on or across it, nor independently of those who observe it. Spielberg's film *The Terminal* portrays the plight of a state-less man trapped in an airport terminal which is neither US territory nor otherwise; as an official advises him, 'You have fallen through a crack in the system'. No-one else notices or cares. The terminal is a crack, an interstice—the place that is not a place—but only to the person who experiences it as such.

Historical, because, as the closing of the American frontier illustrates (F. Turner 1893), time may erase the threshold quality of a given site. For nearly a millennium, Paradise was accorded liminal traits in medieval *mappae mundi*: it was in the world and yet separate from it—enclosed within a wall or frame, sited on an island or on the ocean shore (Delumeau 1992). Faithful to this convention, when in 1459 Fra Mauro devised his famous map he represented Eden as a circular sea-engirted island surrounded by city-walls.¹⁵ In the face of tradition, however, his Paradise stands wholly *outside* the chart, in a decorative vignette tucked into the bottom left corner of the parchment. Over the next few decades, Paradise simply disappeared from world maps—it was already well on its way out when the New World was discovered. One way to interpret this is to say that the liminal became *marginal*, a mere footnote to the text;¹⁶ as such, it could easily be dispensed with.

I have dealt with a variety of readable objects: film, map, ballad, tragedy; tales of heroes and migrants; or textualisations of frontiers. Insofar as they are characterised by *narrativity*, they all exhibit the same principle of inflexion; it is only that the manifestations of this principle vary greatly. Enlargement, compression, omission, erasure, iteration are but some of the strategies whereby new narratives keep being produced out of the universal matrix. There is a caveat to this: all 'changes' are to be taken onboard as integral parts of the structure of the 'monomyth', not as exceptions, variations on or violations of some 'true' or 'prototypical' narrative form. Rather than a neatly closed loop (departure-adventure-return), the map of the monomyth resembles a garden of forking paths in which certain tracks are largely well-trodden, others predictable, many others virtual or untried—all practicable, all contingent. Hence, the monomyth can be seen as an endlessly inflected growth of rhizomatic form. I can then but restate my initial 'universal' claim: insofar as it adheres to the law of double narrative, explores what happens and what *can* happen, and is endlessly inflected, all fiction is liminal. Whence my fifth proposition, which is really a summary of the other four:

¹⁵ See Whitfield (1997). For a digital edition see Fra Mauro World Map, Museo Galileo website, Florence, <https://mostre.museogalileo.it/framauro/en/interactive-exploration/explore.html>

¹⁶ By 'marginal' I mean that which occupies the 'empty', non-significant part of the page, the area which, since the advent of print, is not meant to contain text; for the distinction between 'marginal' and 'liminal', see Aguirre, Quance, Sutton (2000: 1-10).

PROPOSITION 5. *Liminality lies potentially everywhere.*

Being an inflexional construct, the limen knows no boundaries, and so can expand, replicate itself, shift, contract, vanish; hence it has no fixed nature. This means that limina can be found wherever we care to look, and that liminality has become for us, denizens of the twenty-first century, a fifth dimension of our universe.

This said, for the concept of liminality to be useful it must remain a peculiarity of thresholds (edges, borders, surfaces, moments); it is only that, because these keep emerging, changing, shifting, and disappearing, we never know where, when, or in what guise a threshold will crop up across our field of vision. Therefore, while needing to remain ever alert to the possible emergence of a significant limen, one must resist the temptation to make universalistic proposals, such as that 'all fiction is liminal', for when the category embraces the entire field of study it loses its practical value. Its use in research hinges on relevance; when we say that something is liminal, we face two questions. The first is, liminal with respect to what? For liminality is a contrastive notion: it makes sense to predicate it of an X only when a commensurable Y can be described as non-liminal (or as liminal to a lesser degree). The second: in what way does this claim advance our understanding of the text? For liminality is an instrumental notion: its study is a means, not an end. 'Proving' that an X is liminal may be interesting as an exercise in analysis, but it will hardly be informative unless it serves some further purpose.

This paper has argued that liminality is to be subjected to a 'reading', that is, to an analysis of the elements that configure the liminal status of a given object, namely, its codes and narrative laws, its frames, paratexts and structures, its participants and 'voices', as well as the speech acts, intentions and reader expectations encoded in the text. It has advanced the following closely connected propositions and a number of corollaries:

1. *The limen is inflected.* It is the interstitial, but also the straddling, the multiform, the rhizomatic, the nomadic.
2. *The limen tends to acquire width.* Being void, it invites crossing, but also entry, exploration, occupation. It may provide a liberating experience, but it is also apt to imprison and engulf. It may expand 'backwards', too, in the sense that its effects may be felt before it is actually reached.
3. *Liminality results in, or is the outcome of, replication.* *Mise-en-abyme*, reduplication, mirroring, phasing, echoing create liminal spaces or liminalise ordinary space.
4. *The limen has no fixed nature.* It is subject-dependent (experiential) and time-bound (historical).

5. *Liminality lies potentially everywhere*. It is a contrastive and instrumental concept, not a category but a function.

These motions and traits of the limen become discernible in the study of texts and textualised events; to be aware of them is to wield a precision tool for the analysis of a disconcerting object of study, the threshold in all its manifestations. In particular, one can never stress enough that the liminal does not constitute a category; it is, rather, a function of objects and events experienced by subjects (characters), seen by observers (readers), wrought by agents (authors), or reported by sources (narrators) within a consensus spatiotemporal reality (context, co-text, chronotope). Alter any of these elements—character, reader, narrator, author, context—and the stable may become liminal, and what was liminal may cease to be such. I surmise that these complexities are best detected by approaching the liminal as if it were text.

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