

PLAY, LIMINALITY AND LITERARY DISCOURSE

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In the past three decades, contemporary theory has attempted to rethink, among many other issues, the relationship between margin and center in Western culture. One has by now become familiar with Michel Foucault's reflections on Georges Bataille's notion of transgression, with Jacques Derrida's theses on the margins of (rational) discourse, or with Aron Gurwitsch's "marginal consciousness". It is widely accepted that the center and the margin express a power relation, that they are mutually interdependent, locked in an unstable, easily reversible dialectic. The interplay between philosophical and literary discourse in Western culture is one of the prime examples of how margin can convert into center and vice versa¹. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his essays on the dialogic imagination in Rabelais, Dostoevski, and the Western novel in general, has traced the agonistic relation between literature and politics, showing how novelistic discourse is among the subversive, carnivalesque, centrifugal forces that resist the centripetal, canonical pull in Western culture. Within the field of poetry, Harold Bloom has traced the agon between influential literary figures and schools in terms of an implicitly reversible, Nietzschean dialectic of weak and strong. Current North American cultural studies on gender and race attempt either to redefine the position of various marginal groups in relation to a cultural center or to do away with this center altogether.

1. For a detailed historical examination of the origins of the "quarrel" between poetry and philosophy in Western culture, see Mihai I. Spariosu, *God of Many Names: Play, Poetry, and Power in Hellenic Thought from Homer to Aristotle* (Durham, N. C., 1991), especially pp. 141-235; for some of the modern consequences of this agon, see Mihai I. Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1989), especially pp. 161-163.

All of the theoretical strands mentioned above, as well as many others, start from the premise of the essential complicity between center and margin, assuming the agonistic nature of this correlation. In the present essay, I shall attempt to show how literature as a marginal cultural phenomenon can also detach itself from the center, transcending its immediate, agonistic context and pointing to values that are outside a Western tradition governed by a mentality of power. In other words, I shall attempt to redefine literary discourse not as marginal, but as liminal, that is, as a threshold or passageway, allowing access to alternative worlds that may subsequently become actualized through communal choice. The liminal character of literary discourse derives from its ludic nature, for play is the liminal space par excellence, as thinkers point out again and again throughout the history of this concept. I shall begin by sketching a brief history of the notion of liminality in Western literary theory, concentrating especially on the best known "defenses of poesis" from Gorgias to Sidney to Schiller to Shelley as well as on some of the contemporary versions of these defenses. Then I shall review some current notions of actual, possible, and fictional worlds and propose an alternative way of considering literary or artistic productions in general in terms of liminal worlds. First, however, a general discussion of cultural liminality would be in order.

The term "liminal" originated in the field of anthropology where Arnold Van Gennep used it, in his *Rites de passage* (1908), in order to describe rituals associated with both seasonal changes and individual or communal life changes in small-scale cultures. Van Gennep distinguishes three stages in a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the first stage, the neophyte is isolated from the rest of the community through a rite that separates sacred from secular time and space; during the transition, which Van Gennep calls "margin" or "limen" (meaning "threshold" in Latin), the neophyte goes through a period or area of social ambiguity or limbo. During the final stage of incorporation, the neophyte returns to a new and relatively stable position in the community at large.

Victor Turner takes over Van Gennep's notion of liminality and attempts to apply it not only to small-scale cultures but also to large-scale ones². Turner calls the liminal stage an "antistructure" because it inverts or dissolves the normal (and normative) structural order prevalent in the rest of the community. Not only may liminality include subversive and playful events but it may also be regarded as the ludic time-space par excellence. Referring to Brian Sutton-Smith's paper on "Games of Order and Disorder" (1972), Turner in effect sees liminality as a game of disorder out of which new orders emerge³. He defines liminal situations as "seeds of cultural creativity" that generate new models, symbols, and paradigms. These new symbols and paradigms then

feed back into the 'central' economic and politico-legal domains and arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raison d'être* (28).

2.- See, especially, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1969), *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1974), and *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982).

3.- See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982), p. 24. Further page references will be to this edition. Because of their view of play as creating order out of chaos, both Brian Sutton-Smith and Victor Turner can be seen as precursors of the "chaos" theory that has recently gained wide support in physics and the natural sciences.

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One can agree with Turner that liminality is more than a passive, negative condition or the intermediary-mediating phase between two positive conditions (one in the past, the other in the future). Liminality contains both positive and active qualities, especially when the *threshold*

is protracted and becomes a 'tunnel', when the 'liminal' becomes the 'cunicular' (41).

One can also partially agree with Turner that meaning in culture

tends to be *generated* at the interfaces between established cultural subsystems, though meanings are then institutionalized and consolidated at centers of such systems. Liminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos' (41).

Here Turner offers an excellent description of the dialectic between center and margin that I have mentioned at the beginning of this essay. But one should also point out that even though the margin can oftentimes redefine the center, the liminal as the cunicular may not necessarily always lead back to a center; on the contrary, it may, under certain conditions, lead away from it in a steady and irreversible fashion. One needs, therefore, to distinguish between marginality and liminality, although not necessarily in Turner's terms⁴. For me, marginality refers to an agonistic relation (between the center and the margins of a structure, system, subsystem, or world), whereas liminality refers to a neutral relation (between two or more systems, subsystems, structures, worlds, etc.), such as obtains, for instance, in a no man's land between two or more state borders. Moreover, marginality cannot provide access to nor can it initiate new worlds, whereas liminality can do both. In this sense, a margin can be liminal, but a limen cannot be marginal. For me, therefore, liminality can both subsume and transcend a dialectic of margin and center.

1. Theories of Literary Liminality: A Brief Historical Sketch

In the history of Western literary theory, the concept of liminality has appeared under at least three, often interrelated, guises. Thus literature has been seen as either supportive or subversive marginality, as mediating neutrality, and as selftranscending plasticity. In all three guises, liminality has often appeared as an instrument of a mentality of power which has often posited it as the groundless ground of its own existence.

In the Western world, literary discourse becomes a self-consciously liminal phenomenon during the transition from an oral to a literate culture in ancient Greece, when the central archaic cultural complex known as *mousike* breaks down into various disciplines that start competing for cultural authority in the polis. This agonistic process transpires in Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates lays the theoretical foundations for the emergence of philosophy (defined as the master science of Being) as a hegemonic discourse in Western culture. At the same time, Socrates marginalizes poetic discourse as *mimesis* or ludic (dis)simulation of true, philosophical discourse, separating it from all claims of authority-power on both onto-epistemological and ethical grounds⁵.

4.- For Turner's attempt to distinguish between marginality and liminality, see, for example, his *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, especially, p. 233 f.

5.- For a detailed argument, see Spariosu, *God of Many Names*, pp. 141-194.

That poetry as authoritative discourse comes under attack in philosophical quarters even before Socrates delivers it the *coup de grace* is evident in Gorgias's paradox attempting to defend tragedy as a liminal ground between fiction and truth:

By its stories [*muthoi*, myths in the sense of traditional stories, narrative matter] and emotions, tragedy generates a deception in which the deceiver is more just [*dikaioteros*] than the non-deceiver, and the deceived is wiser [*sophoteros*] than the non-deceived⁶.

This paradox gains even more clarity in the light of two others: the first says that "one must mar (*diaphseirein*) the opponent's seriousness (*spouden*) with jest, and the opponent's jest (*gelota*) with seriousness" (DK B 12); the second says that "being (*einai*) is unknowable if it fails to appear (*afanes*), appearance is weak (*asthenes*) if it fails to be (*einai*)" (DK B 26). In these two paradoxes, Gorgias plays with the conceptual and ethical oppositions between play and seriousness, being and seeming, truth and illusion, which he also invokes in DK B 23. In the latter fragment, he obviously defends tragedy against the accusations of falsehood, deception, and irresponsible play that must have been current in his day and subsequently crop up in the Platonic dialogues as well. Although tragedy employs traditional stories and emotions in order to create an appearance of truth (an illusion or, in ethical terms, a deception), it cannot properly be called a lie because it never claims to be true (partaking of being) in the first place. For this very reason, however, it is more true or honest than any discourse that claims the opposite. If you are wise, therefore, you can learn more about the apparent nature of truth, or the truthful nature of appearance (that is, about the phenomenal nature of being, or the ontic nature of phenomena) from tragic poetry than from any other discourse. Gorgias in effect employs tragedy to challenge the conceptual and ethical polarities between being and seeming, or truth and deception. At the same time, he locates dramatic poetry in the no man's land between essence and appearance, or between truth and illusion, thus initiating an important theoretical topos in the history of literary criticism.

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the liminal nature of poetry is indirectly invoked in the notion of *mimesis*, which for both Plato and Aristotle means not so much "imitation" as "simulation"⁷. Poetry is a form of play that simulates other kinds of discourse for pleasurable purposes and, therefore, cannot be held to the same standards of truth as philosophy and history. If Gorgias situates tragic poetry in the liminal space between being and appearance, Aristotle implicitly situates it in the liminal space between philosophy and history. This becomes clear when he observes, on the one hand, that "the artist may simulate things as they ought to be" (*Poetics* 1460b9-11); and, on the other hand, that "poetry is more abstract and more serious [*philosophoteron kai spoudaioteron*] than history; for poetry selects for expression [*legei*] the universal, history the particular" (*Poetics* 1451b5-7). Here, at first sight, Aristotle seems simply to draw a comparison between poetry and history on philosophical grounds. Insofar as tragic poetry simulates philosophical discourse, which is concerned both with the "universal" and with what could or ought to be (possibility), it is more abstract and more serious than history, which is concerned with the "particular" or with what has been (necessity). Aristotle obviously implies, however, that poetry simulates not only philosophy

6.- See Gorgias, Fr. B 23, in H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 vols., 6th ed. (Berlin, 1952). Further citations from Gorgias will refer to this edition. The English translations are mine.

7.- For a full discussion of the Platonic and Aristotelian notion of *mimesis* and its ludic implications, see Spariosu, *God of Many Names*, especially pp. 149-160 and pp. 197-210. All of the English translations from Aristotle's *Poetics* below are mine.

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but also history and, therefore, is an in-between form of discourse that concerns both possibility and necessity; in other words, tragic poetry can in principle mediate between philosophy and history, correcting philosophy's predominant concern with abstraction or with what ought to be, and history's predominant concern with facticity or with what has been. In Aristotle, then, we can indirectly glimpse the traditional idea of literary discourse as mediator among other kinds of discourse.

Of course, through the notion of *mimesis* both Plato and Aristotle attempt to keep poetic discourse subordinated at all times to philosophical discourse, assigning it a marginal (rather than a liminal), supportive role. But subsequent theorists, taking a second look at the Platonic dialogues, also point out that insofar as any literary imitation, let alone simulation, can never be a simple copy, it will always escape or exceed its model(s) whether they belong to a constituted or surmised reality, or to the art realm itself. Literary simulation may either reverse or undermine the model (as in mime, satire, parody, and the burlesque); but it may also tacitly or openly revise or redefine the model (as in utopian and science fiction, or in what we understand by fantastic or imaginary literature in general). In other words, literature can be seen as either subversive or supportive-corrective marginality. Moreover, its supportive-corrective role can be correlated with its mediating role, and it is this correlation that can often be found in the traditional defenses of poetry from Sidney to Schiller to Shelley.

In his *Apologie for Poetrie* (1583), Sir Philip Sidney invokes *Poetics* 14551b in support of the view of poetry as a liminal space between philosophy and history. He argues that while the philosopher "giveth the precept" and the historian "the example" the poet does both⁸. The poet can, moreover, be seen as a "moderator" or mediator between the moral philosopher and the historian:

Now whom shall we find ... to be moderator? Truly, as me seemeth, the poet; and if not a moderator, even the man that ought to carry the title from them both [i.e., the philosopher and the historian], and much more from all other serving sciences (160).

Like Gorgias, Sidney goes against the vulgar prejudice that views the poet as liar. He contends that the effectiveness of poetic art, unlike that of philosophical or scientific writing, does not depend on a rhetoric of truth and falsehood:

Of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar.

Unlike the astronomer, the geometrician, the physician, and all the other scientists, the poet can never be a liar because he does not claim to know anything:

he nothing affirms and therefore never lieth (168).

The poet never "maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes", nor does he cite undisputed authorities to support his tales. On the contrary, he openly admits the fictional nature of his discourse and

even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention (168).

8.- See Sir Philip Sidney, *Apologie for Poetrie*, in Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory since Plato* (New York/Chicago/San Francisco, 1971), p. 160. Further page references are to this edition.

By freeing his discourse from the inflexible demands of truth, however, the poet is paradoxically able to open up and redefine the conventional borders between truth and falsehood. Thus, Sidney in effect sees poetic fictions as breeding grounds for intellectual and moral truths:

And therefore as in history, looking for truth, they may go away full fraught with falsehood, so in poesy, looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention (168).

Sidney also hints at the crucial role that the imagination plays in the generation of socio-cultural truths which, ontologically speaking, are little more than "profitable inventions" and here he could have invoked no lesser an authority than Socrates in Plato's *Republic* to support his view.

Sidney's idea of poetry as a liminal ground between truth and falsehood—an idea that had some prominence in Renaissance literary theory in general, but was given less importance in Neoclassical mimetic doctrines of art—is taken up by the Romantics, especially by Friedrich von Schiller and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who turn against the Neoclassical notion of poetic imitation. Schiller attempts to revise this notion in his *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* ("Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man", 1795), where he links poetic discourse to play as the highest manifestation of man's creative faculty⁹. In keeping with the triadic thinking typical of such German idealist Thinkers as Kant and Fichte, Schiller sees art-play as a third realm, that of aesthetic phenomena, which mediates between the realm of necessity (matter) and the realm of freedom (spirit). Via the play drive, which in art manifests itself as aesthetic semblance or illusion (*Schein*), art detaches humankind from its sensuous nature and directs it toward its spiritual and moral nature:

The transition from a passive state of feeling to an active state of thinking and willing cannot, then, take place except *via* a middle state of aesthetic freedom. And although this state can of itself decide nothing as regards either our insights or our convictions, thus leaving both our intellectual and our moral worth as yet entirely problematic, it is nevertheless the necessary pre-condition of our attaining to any insight or conviction at all. In a word, there is no other way of making sensuous man rational except by first making him aesthetic¹⁰.

Here Schiller, like Sidney, attempts to raise art to the level of a mediator, but always under the supervision of Reason. The play drive itself is a useful fiction on an *as if* concept in Vaihinger's sense, invented by Reason in order to deal with the realm of necessity. In the next paragraph of the same letter, Schiller insists that aesthetic illusion has no cognitive value outside the dialectic of necessity and possibility, nature and morality, intellect and will:

It has been expressly proved [by Kant] that beauty can produce no result, neither for the understanding nor for the will; that it does not meddle in the business of either thinking or deciding; that it merely imparts the power to do both, but has no say whatsoever in the actual use of that power. In the actual use of it all other aid whatsoever is dispensed with; and the pure logical form, namely the concept, must

9.- For a full discussion of Schiller's theory of art as play see Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, pp. 53-65.

10.- See Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford, 1967), letter XXIII, p. 161. Further page references are to this edition.

speak directly to the understanding, the pure moral form, namely the law, directly to the will (161).

In one sense, then, by positing art as a third realm mediating between truth and lie, Schiller reinforces Sidney's notion of poetry as a liminal space, even though he does not challenge the Neo-Aristotelian subordination of poetry to Reason. In this respect, he also preserves the traditional link between the supportive-corrective and the mediating roles of literature as a ludic-liminal form of discourse.

Shelley, in *A Defense of Poetry* (1821), echoes Schiller's theory of the aesthetic state when he declares poets to be the "unacknowledged legislators of the world"¹¹. Like Schiller, Shelley sees the poetic faculty both as a precondition of and a corrective to the practical pursuits of humanity. For Shelley, however, the Imagination (not Reason) has its immediate source in that unity of Being which becomes fragmented in the modern age. Unlike Schiller, therefore, Shelley does not see poetry as a conscious illusion devised by Reason, but as the highest "expression of the imagination" (499), that is, as a direct manifestation of the unity of Being. Reason is

the principle of analysis, and its action regards the relation of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts not in their integral unity, but as the algebraic representations which conduct to certain general results (499).

By contrast, imagination is

the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself (499).

Reason reveals the differences, whereas imagination reveals the similarities among things. As an instrument of the imagination, poetry both precedes and guides reason. In the wake of Sidney, Shelley argues that poetry operates at a higher level than "the ethical science" (as well as the political one) which only

arranges the elements poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civic and domestic life (503).

Poetry, on the other hand,

awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought (503).

It furnishes the imagination with

thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food (503).

This idea of intervals and interstices whose void produces a constant need for renewal and change goes a long way toward defining the liminal mechanism in terms of self-transcending plasticity, a notion taken up and developed by contemporary thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Wolfgang Iser. In this regard, Shelley implies that the poets necessarily function as *unacknowledged* legislators and prophets because they can and should operate

11.- See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, in Adams, ed., *Critical Theory since Plato*, p. 513. Further page references are to this edition.

only at a liminal level: by constantly pointing to such ineffable, imaginative categories as "the eternal, the infinite, and the one" (500), they implicitly set ever-new goals for the spiritual development of humankind. They are social harbingers, moreover, not because they predict the form, but because they predict the spirit of events. A poet

not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his ideas are both

the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time (500).

Through its liminal nature, poetry both precedes and anticipates the paradigms of thought that other forms of discourse take up and concretize in a particular historical manner. It is

at once the center and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root the blossom of all other systems of thought (511).

Here, Shelley stands the Socratic doctrine of the good and the beautiful on its head: it is poetry, not philosophy that is now the carrier of this doctrine and is entrusted with the reformation of humankind. By the same token, however, Shelley remains within the Platonic idealist system, whose idea of Being equally pervades his poetic legislative project. It matters little, from an anthropological standpoint, whether Reason or the Imagination, Philosophy or Poetry is entrusted with the carrying out of the Socratic program. No less than Schiller, therefore, Shelley maintains a correlation between the supportive-corrective and the mediating roles of literary liminality.

Whereas in the Neoplatonic tradition poetry as mediator among various kinds of discourse remains under the tutelage of Platonic Being and is nearly always made to serve its interests, in the modernist age it becomes emancipated from this tutelage, but falls under the dominion of Becoming, especially in Nietzsche and the artist-metaphysicians. I have shown elsewhere how an aesthetic view of the world as ceaseless Becoming, where all that is is a play of simulacra or illusion gives poetry the task of undermining the world of Being as eternal truth. In the present context, what is relevant is that the internal conflicts within the realm of philosophy have revealed the various functions poetic discourse has been assigned over the centuries and that these functions are historically and culturally determined. What has gradually emerged, in the modern age, is the awareness of a functionalist dialectic of reality and fiction, where certain fictions or imaginative constructs perform as truths according to various cultural needs and interests. In line with this functionalist dialectic, contemporary theorists have further developed the notion of literary liminality by correlating its various elements, such as the ideas of the imagination, self-conscious illusion or fiction, and play.

The idea of imagination in particular has been revolutionized by the contemporary phenomenological and psychoanalytic schools, culminating in Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the imagination as the groundless ground of human consciousness¹². In *The Psychology of Imagination* (1972), Sartre notes:

12.- For both a history and a development of the Western concept of imagination see, most recently, Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris, 1975); Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1984); and Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1993), especially, pp. 171-246.

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The imaginary appears 'on the foundation of the world', but reciprocally all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary. All imaginative consciousness uses the world as the negated foundation of the imaginary and reciprocally all consciousness of the world calls and motivates an imaginative consciousness as grasped from the particular *meaning* of the situation¹³.

According to Sartre, imagination is a form of nothingness or void which is "lived, without even being posited for itself", and is thus able to create all meaning. Because the apprehension of the void or nothingness which is the imagination cannot occur by an immediate unveiling, it develops through the free succession of various acts of consciousness. Consequently the imagination,

far from appearing as an accidental characteristic of consciousness, turns out to be an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness (218).

In this respect, Sartre's view of imagination as a liminal, creative "nothingness" is a phenomenological version of Shelley's notion of poetic imagination as a series of "new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food" and thus also contributes to the idea of literary liminality as self-transcending plasticity. By constantly confronting past and present human achievements with the all-devouring void of the imagination, literature ceaselessly produces new paradigms of thought and action in a tireless effort to satisfy this void.

In addition to pointing out the liminal nature of the imaginary and the fictive, contemporary literary theorists have further developed the traditional concept of literary liminality as marginality (either supportive-corrective or subversive), mediating neutrality, and self-transcending plasticity. Most notably, Giuseppe Mazzotta, in *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (1979) and *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron* (1986), creatively employs Turner's theory of liminality in discussing the medieval and early Renaissance literary tradition. For example, in his early book on the *Divine Comedy*, Mazzotta sees Dante's exile as a liminal condition which the poet shares with literature in general. According to Mazzotta, in the Christian tradition, the liminal figures par excellence are Christ, and closer to Dante, St. Francis of Assisi who is presented in *Paradiso* XI. By renouncing his wealth and marrying Lady Poverty, St. Francis

moves to the fringes of society, to a symbolic area where the forms of the world lose whatever fixed and stable sense convention has imposed on them¹⁴.

St. Francis thus places himself in a liminal space, between social structure and the divine dispensation. Through the foundation of the mendicant order he institutionalizes

the area of mediation between the world of contingency and history, and the absolute model of Paradise and a Christ-like existence (111).

St. Francis's mendicant community is a

13.- See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, translated with an Introduction by Mary Warnock (London, 1972), p. 218.

14.- See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, N. J., 1979), Chapter 3, "Communitas and its Typological Structure", p. 109. Further citations refer to this edition.

scandalous utopia which is disengaged from history and yet has a radical historicity both because it is predicated as the *telos* of history and because it provides the perspective which makes possible a fresh and renewed apprehension of the structures of the world (112).

In turn, Dante's exile, not unlike that of St. Francis is

far from being a mystical escape into some sort of visionary privacy.

On the contrary, it is

the stance affording the detached vantage point from which he can speak to the world and impose his sense of order on it (112).

For Dante, exile is equally

the very condition of the [literary] text, its most profound metaphor (145).

He deliberately oscillates between

the vision of order in the empirical, concrete city of Florence and the 'attender certo' of the glory of Jerusalem.

His liminal poetic world

places us in history and against history, in a garden which is a desert where nomads are always on the way (146).

In his book on Boccaccio, Mazzotta continues to develop his theory of literature as an exilic, liminal space. According to him, in Boccaccio's *The Decameron* literature figures as a

middleground between two absences, between utopia and social structures, a provisional retreat from the city in an atemporal space¹⁵.

From this marginal state, literature can reflect "both on itself and on the chaos of the world", and then return to the world

with a vitally renewed apprehension of its structures (55).

Thus, Mazzotta implies that in Boccaccio, no less than in Dante, the liminal poetic world can in principle mediate between the divine and the historical worlds: by constantly pointing to the divine ethical standards, literature can perpetually revise and modify the historical ones; in this sense, it also reveals human nature as self-transcending plasticity.

Unlike Dante, however, Boccaccio does not write on the margins of the City of God, and therefore for him (secular) literature falls short of providing the hope that it provides for Dante. Boccaccio expresses this dilemma through

a state of tension between two types of literary mediation, the erotic mediation and the prophetic mediation (72).

15.- *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron* (Princeton, N. J., 1986), p. 56. Further page references are to this edition.

In this sense, Boccaccio is already a modern poet: he can regard the mediating nature of literature only in parodic, ironic terms, as a negative potentiality. The "inevitable marginality of the literary act" can accomplish little more than to "efface the fictions—literary and spiritual—of society" (72). In the conclusion of *The Decameron*, Mazzotta argues, Boccaccio

abdicates responsibility for the effect of the book on the audience, tries to disclaim authorship for the tales and finally releases them in a moral vacuum as neutral and autonomous objects to be interpreted by the reader. The marginality is total, which is to say another void; the reader is abstracted from history waiting to reemerge into history; the writer even denies any centrality for himself (72-73).

The radical "uselessness" of literature relegates it to a "perennial marginality". Mazzotta returns, however, to the earlier insight of his Dante book, adding that the profound (ethical) value of literature resides precisely in its uselessness,

with its power to challenge, even as it is fascinated with, the utilitarian, 'real' values that have currency in the social world (74).

Mazzotta probes into the liminal nature of literature as both a form of exile and a mediator between theology and history. Virgil Nemoianu, concentrating especially on the Romantic and the Modernist periods, complements Mazzotta's project by examining the nature of the relationship between the central and the marginal, or what he calls "primary" and "secondary" in culture. In *A Theory of the Secondary* (1989), Nemoianu concedes that literary discourse has a secondary cultural importance in relation to philosophy, history, jurisprudence, economics, politics, and so forth, but then he redefines the "secondary" in terms of a functional relation to the "principal". Whereas the positional roles of principal and secondary remain the same, the content of the two terms ceaselessly shifts around in Nemoianu's dynamic view of culture: what appears as principal in a certain age may assume a secondary position in another. Finally, the principal always collapses back into the secondary, which for Nemoianu is an inevitable but positive form of defeat:

Far from relying on erective and harmonizing energies, the secondary finds artistic expression though disorder, relaxation and idleness. Negligence, tolerance, and procrastination are its allies, lack of energy and purpose provide its strength. Literature as the secondary in society and history is a force for defeat, and thus for renewal. Since every progress can be true to its name only at its very inception, the defeat of further advances can only be seen as a beneficent strategy, the condition for a new inceptive progress¹⁶.

For Nemoianu, therefore, literary discourse as marginality has ultimately a supportive, if paradoxical role in continuously redefining the nature and the meaning of the center (which for him represents not so much an ontological plenitude as an ontological void).

With Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1933) the history of the concept of literature as ludic liminality reaches its entelechy. Although Iser does not use the term "liminality" as such, he in effect regards literature as a form of liminal play which not only mediates between imagination and actuality but also reveals itself to be a primary manifestation of human nature as perpetually self-transcending plasticity.

16. See Virgil Nemoianu, *A Theory of the Secondary: Literature, Progress and Reaction* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 191.

Iser's view of the ludic comes close to that of Schiller (without the latter's emphasis on rationality), while his view of the imagination expands and modifies those of Shelley and Sartre. Iser posits literary play as a triadic interaction between the imaginary, the fictive, and the real. Literary fictionality is a halfway house located between the real and the imaginary, where the fictive brings together and mediates between what is and what is not yet. As Iser puts it, the "act of fictionalizing" implies "a crossing of boundaries". On the one hand, this act crosses the boundaries of a given social or physical reality and strips it of its rigid determinacy by selecting, recombining, and bracketing some of its constituent elements; on the other hand, it crosses into the world of the imaginary (characterized by endless plasticity), giving it a certain direction or determinacy. Thus literary discourse

crosses the boundaries both of what it organizes (external reality) and of what it converts into a gestalt (the diffusiveness of the imaginary). It leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and it thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a nongiven world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accessible to the reader's experience¹⁷.

Hence, the fictive in literature becomes a "transitional object", a ludic, borderline phenomenon,

always hovering between the real and the imaginary, linking the two together¹⁸.

In one sense, it can be said to exist because "it houses all the processes of interchange". In another sense, however, the fictive

does not exist as a discrete entity, for it consists of nothing but these transformational processes (20).

Here, then, Iser redefines in phenomenological terms the Kantian and Schillerian notions of the aesthetic as a mediator between imagination and reason.

For Iser, one of the most important features of literary play is "staging", through which the literary work brackets an extratextual reality, putting it on display, as it were, and thus allowing the audience to distance itself from and conceive possible alternatives to it¹⁹.

17.- See Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore/London, 1993), p. 4. Further citations will refer to this edition.

18.- Here Iser employs D. W. Winnicott's term in *Playing and Reality* (London/New York, 1971). For Winnicott a "transitional object" is a material object such as a corner of blanket or napkin, a bundle of wool, etc., which has a special value for the infant between the ages of four and twelve months. The transitional object occupies the neutral space between the inner and the outer world of the infant, before the final split between the two occurs with the development of a self. It has lasting effects on individuals even after their infant stage is over, however, being retained throughout life "in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to creative scientific work" (p. 14). Thus Iser uses Winnicott's notion of transitional object in both a ludic and a liminal sense. For a critique of Winnicott's psychological theory of play, see Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn* (pp. 187-190). For various applications of Turner's notion of liminality in psychotherapy, see Nathan Schwartz-Salant and Murray Stein, eds. *Liminality and Transitional Phenomena* (Wilmette, Illinois, 1991).

19.- A kindred view of literary staging can be found in my *God of Many Names*, especially, pp. 99-139. It is also obvious that staging is an important aspect of any theory of literary reception including Iser's own, as it always presupposes the involvement and the cooperation of an audience. In this sense, even such traditional notions as literary realism can best be viewed in terms of an interplay between author and reader-audience, that is, as a staging of (our notions of) reality. For a cogent theory of fictional realism in the context of an aesthetics of literary reception, see Darío Villanueva, *Teorías del realismo literario* (Madrid, 1992).

Through staging, which is a highly self-conscious act, literature in general becomes an anthropological phenomenon which features "the extraordinary plasticity of human beings" (297). Citing Cornelius Castoriadis's work on the imagination, Iser observes that fictionality is "the ideal reflection of the creative act". Because the creative act constantly exposes itself as fiction it perpetually denies itself authenticity. This self-denial, however, is far from being unproductive; on the contrary, it enables the self

to be simultaneously inside and outside itself, making it possible for the self to create itself (78).

Because humans seem to possess an indeterminate nature, they

can expand into an almost unlimited range of culture-bound patternings. The impossibility of being present to ourselves becomes our possibility to play ourselves out to a fullness that knows no bounds, because no matter how vast the range, none of the possibilities will 'make us tick' (296).

Through the act of staging, therefore,

literature becomes a panorama of what is possible, because it is not hedged in either by the limitations or by the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life otherwise takes its course (296).

Furthermore, because literature constantly monitors the ever-changing manifestations of human self-fashioning without ever completely coinciding with any of these manifestations, it

makes the interminable staging of ourselves appear as the postponement of the end (296).

Here Iser, like early Heidegger and other existentialist phenomenologists, places human play within the borders of birth and death, with the self constantly attempting to outstrip in order to defer the inevitable end. In this respect, he equally inscribes himself in the German anthropological tradition of Arnold Gehlen and Helmuth Plessner who stress the creative or constructive side of power, rather than its dark, (self-)destructive side. Iser can, therefore, also be seen as the latest and one of the most brilliant representatives of a long line of theorists who consider literary liminality in both its mediating and supportive-corrective roles vis-a-vis a mentality of power.

A view of literary liminality almost diametrically opposed to that of Iser (as well as to those of Mazzotta and Nemoianu) appears in Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's *Literature and Liminality* (1986). In this study, Pérez-Firmat concentrates on the agonistic relation of the periphery to the center within a certain Hispanic literary tradition, seeing this relation not as functional, but as highly dysfunctional. In the wake of Bakhtin, de Man, and Bloom, Pérez-Firmat understands liminality as subversive marginality, a concept which he pushes to its ultimate consequences. Invoking Turner's notion of anti-structure, Pérez-Firmat borrows the medical metaphor of cancer from Luis Martín-Santos' influential novel, *Tiempo de silencio* (1962), in order to explain the subversive relationship between the liminal as the marginal and the central order:

The liminal structure behaves like a phase insofar as its peripheral components do not abide in the margins. They occupy the periphery only transitorily, while maintaining the center under constant siege. The impending return does not, however, as in Van Gennep's conception, bring about an integrative reunification —any more than a cancer's metastasis brings about a reconciliation of the healthy and

the diseased cells. On the contrary, the periphery's convergence poses a deadly threat to the central order. In this respect all my conversions are metastatic, since they aggressively repudiate stasis or immobility²⁰.

For Pérez-Firmat, liminality is a centrifugal force that ultimately invades and destroys the center, annihilating itself in the process. It therefore becomes a symptom of a diseased will to power that turns against itself, much like Nietzsche's active forces that become reactive and, hence, self-destructive in the *Genealogy of Morals*.

If Pérez-Firmat's deconstructive view of literary liminality (or, rather, marginality) may seem extreme, it nevertheless obeys the logic of a mentality of power which, as Nietzsche himself acknowledges at the end of the *Genealogy of Morals*, would annihilate itself rather than change its nature. In *Literature, Mimesis, and Play* (1982), I attempted to present a more balanced view of literary liminality from the standpoint of power, a view not incompatible with those of Iser, Mazzotta, and Nemoianu. There I saw literary discourse as a mediating, neutral space where new discursive games of power are being ceaselessly (re)created and old ones, constantly tempered. Thus literature as fiction becomes the hidden condition of the possibility of all true discourse, guaranteeing the optimal functioning of the discursive mechanism of power throughout the history of Western culture. The question now is whether literature as liminal play can also give us access to actual and imaginary worlds that are incomensurable with ours; or, to restate the question in more general terms, does the concept of liminality belong exclusively to a mentality of power? In order to provide a satisfactory answer to this question, we must first examine the current notions of alternative worlds and their underlying theoretical assumptions.

2. Literature, Liminality, and Alternative Worlds

The notion of a plurality of worlds has a long history in Western thought from Aristarchus of Samos to Giordano Bruno to Gottfried von Leibnitz. Most recently, this notion has been revived and debated in Anglo-American analytic philosophy by modal logicians such as Alvin Plantinga, Paul Davies, Raymond Bradley, Norman Schwartz, and Saul Kripke²¹. In the wake of Leibnitz, they address the issue in terms of a logical and ontological distinction between "actual" and "possible" worlds. Their argument is that the actual world is only one possible world among an infinity of possible non-actual worlds or "pnaws". Pnaws can in turn be divided into those which can become actual because they obey the physical laws of the actual world, and those which can never become actual because they contain purely imaginary elements that disobey such laws. Thus, although on the face of it analytic thinking appears to postulate a plurality of worlds, in effect it only postulates a plurality of *possible* worlds within one actual (physical) universe. According to this thinking, moreover, imaginary or fictional worlds of the literary kind generally belong to the pnaw subdivision that cannot be actualized. The logical division between imaginary and actual worlds is also indirectly supported by speech-act theorists who draw a rigid distinction

20.- See Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, *Literature and Liminality. Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition* (Durham, N. C., 1986), xviii. Further citations refer to this edition.

21.- See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974); Raymond Bradley and Norman Swartz, *Possible Worlds* (Oxford, 1979); Paul Davies, *Other Worlds* (London, 1980); and Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, 1980).

between actual or "sincere" and fictional or "feigned" speech acts. On this view, literary speech acts are a violation of the "sincerity rule" and thereby turn actual speech-acts into mere pretense²².

The logical divisions of analytic philosophy have, however, been challenged on functionalist grounds by an array of contemporary constructivist and nonessentialist thinkers. According to these thinkers, the real world is no less "minddependent" than the fictional world and the so-called "physical laws" are no less context-bound and conventional than human laws. Constructivist thought usually posits a plurality of worlds with multiple frames of reference, the boundaries of which are flexible, if not indeterminate. Most recently, for example, Nelson Goodman states:

Many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base²³.

According to Goodman, the pluralist needs to go beyond a naive concept of science embraced by

the monopolistic materialist or physicalist who maintains that one system, physics, is preeminent and all-inclusive, such that every other version must eventually be reduced to it or rejected as false or meaningless.

The pluralist's willingness to consider worldversions other than physics

implies no relaxation of rigor but a recognition that standards different from yet no less exacting than those applied in [traditional] science are appropriate for appraising what is conveyed in perceptual or pictorial or literary versions (4).

In the wake of Goodman, Floyd Merrell argues that the actual world is "by and large socially formed and interculturally variable" and that all fictions can become "real worlds"²⁴. The boundaries between real worlds and fictional ones remain necessarily vague:

We can ordinarily distinguish relatively well and at tacit levels between a fiction and what we believe to be the 'real world'. And at the same time we seem to be tacitly aware that there is a boundary between them, but that the boundary is not precise and absolute (39).

Apparently unaware of Turner's theory of liminality, Merrell nevertheless identifies a "fuzziness" between these boundaries, or an "overlapping zone", where "the excluded middle is inoperative, where nothing is exactly identical with itself, and where contradictions are synthesized". It is precisely this fuzzy, overlapping zone or, in our frame of reference, the liminal space, that "enables us to continue being creative" (39).

22.- See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); and John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge, 1969) and, especially, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" in *New Literary History* 6 (1975), pp. 315-330. Of course, as we have seen, the relevance of a "sincerity rule" in the case of literary discourse has already been dismissed effectively by literary theorists from Gorgias to Sidney.

23.- See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1978), p. 4. Further page references are to this edition.

24.- See Floyd Merrell, *Pararealities: The Nature of Our Fictions and How We Know Them* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1983), p. x. Further citations refer to this edition.

Whereas Goodman and Merrell develop a nonessentialist, constructivist approach to reality in general, Thomas G. Pavel applies this approach to literary fictions in particular, challenging what he calls the "segregationist view" of speech-act theory:

By taking for granted the existence and stability of linguistic conventions, speech-act theory neglects the dynamism of their establishment and their inherent fluidity²⁵.

Pavel concludes that the

demarcation between fiction and nonfiction is a variable element and that as an institution fiction cannot be attributed a set of constant properties, an essence (136).

Hence one should operate on the non-segregationist assumption that social behavior contains two sides:

an adventurous, creative side and a tendency to ossify successful novelties into the conventions of normality (26).

Normal and marginal behavior belong, moreover, to a continuum. Thus myths and literary fictions

manifest the innovative side of referential processes and are perceived as marginal only in contrast to some culturally determined ossification into normality (27).

Like Merrell and other thinkers outside the mainstream of the analytic philosophical tradition, Pavel employs Alexis Meinong's theory of "non-existent" objects to account for the ambiguous ontological status of fictions²⁶. Meinong, starting from Brentano's phenomenological claim that all mental states are directed toward something and thus acquire distinguishing features, suggests that what is not is as important as what is. Knowledge pertains not only to "existents", that is, to the empirical objects of science and metaphysics, but also to "nonexistents" (the arts, the imagination, and all inner experiences). In fact, theories about the real world can come about only through the mediation of imaginary worlds (Einstein's theory of relativity is a familiar case in point). Invoking Meinong's theory, Pavel draws a functional distinction between fictional landscapes and ontological ones:

At the margins of ontological landscapes, one finds leisure worlds, or worlds for pleasure, which often derive from older discarded [ontological] models. Each culture has its ontological ruins, its historical parks, where the members of the community relax and contemplate their ontological relics. Greek and Roman gods performed this function till late in the history of European culture. Or marginal models may be used as training grounds for various tasks (141).

Ultimately Pavel sees fiction "as a peripheral region used for ludic and instructional purposes" (143). Paraphrasing Nelson Goodman's phrase, "When Is Art", he suggests that fiction is when "world versions find secondary users" (143).

25.- See Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 26. Further page references are to this edition. One may also consult Pavel's short essay, "Narratives of Ritual and Desire", in Ashley, ed., *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism*, where he refers directly to Turner's anthropological theory.

26.- For an extensive discussion of this topic, see, for example, Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven, 1980).

Like Pavel, Doreen Maitre goes against the mainstream of the analytical philosophical tradition when she describes the interaction between actual worlds and fictional worlds as both dynamic and reciprocal. She argues that literature

makes us aware of both the continuities and the discontinuities between the actual and the possible. We come to see that what we take to be actual does not *have* to be so, that what seem like inevitabilities are not so inevitable, that what *is* could be given alternative explanations and could be changed into something different²⁷.

Finally, by staging non-actual states of affairs, the literary imagination "enables us to consider what alternative states of affairs *could* be the case" (117). One can go farther and say, with Shelley, Sartre, and Iser, that what is not *actively* creates what is, i.e., that literary play ceaselessly mobilizes our imagination to shape and modify our reality.

If a constructivist approach is to be consistent, therefore, it must ultimately give up the logical and ontological distinction between actual and possible worlds, or that between fictional and real ones, even though one may wish to preserve these distinctions in a nonessentialist, functional form. For instance, one may divide alternative worlds into actual and imaginary ones, but without placing strict ontological barriers between them. In principle, all worlds become possible or can be actualized as soon as they arise in the imagination, or to put it differently, actual worlds will always start out as imaginary ones. Why some imaginary worlds eventually become actualized and some do not is hardly an ontological issue; rather, it is a question of communal choice. From a strictly ontological viewpoint, on the other hand, one could treat imaginary and actual worlds as being governed by alternative, equally valid ontological principles rather than by a relation of ontological subordination. Merrell for one acknowledges the conventional nature of our real and imaginary worlds:

Given the assumed possibility of fictions becoming 'real worlds', it must be admitted that any and all 'real worlds' could have been something that at least in part they are not. Hence to be critical of a given aspect of a particular 'real world' as it is ordinarily conceived and perceived is to be aware that the perspective from which the criticism was derived could equally have been in part something other than what it is. To embrace this relativism presents a quandary from which there is no ultimate escape²⁸.

One should, however, note that Merrell's quandary has no exit only from the perspective of a mentality of power, which can conceive of itself only in terms of being and nonbeing, negation and affirmation, inclusion or exclusion. That Merrell shares this mentality is evident in his first postulate:

The Initial Cut in the Flux of Experience Results in an Elemental Negation Whereby That which *Is* Is Contrasted with That which It *Is Not* (1).

Furthermore, after acknowledging the logical necessity of relativism for all constructivist forms of thought, Merrell nevertheless adopts the Nietzschean position with which we are familiar from the last essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*: the play of power must be reaffirmed at all cost. In the present instance, Merrell uneasily combines the

27.- See Doreen Maitre, *Literature and Possible Worlds* (London, 1983), p. 117. Further citations refer to this edition.

28.- See Floyd Merrell, *Pararealities*, p. X. Further page references to this study are in the text.

Nietzschean idea of contest with the Darwinian idea of the struggle for survival and the logical positivist idea of scientific progress:

I submit, nevertheless, that one must provisionally take a stand, that one must present a conjecture and then argue for its validity. Methodological and theoretical pluralism entails competition between ideas, the survival value of these ideas being determined by their ability most effectively to account for the phenomena upon which they focus (x).

Here Merrell remains ambivalent precisely because he does not wish to give power-oriented frame of reference in promoting his version of relativism and pluralism. But one can conceive of a different kind of relativism and/or pluralism in which there are myriads of worlds that incessantly appear, disappear, clash, intersect, co-exist, or steer clear of each other; some of these worlds can be power oriented and some of them can be built on principles other than power. As Nelson Goodman points out, worlds are constituted through composition, selection, combination, weighting, ordering, deletion, supplementation, deformation, and so on²⁹. Of particular interest for the present argument is Goodman's notion of *weighting or accent*:

Some differences among worlds are not so much in entities comprised as in emphasis or accent, and these differences are no less consequential. Just as to stress all syllables is to stress none, so to take all classes as relevant kinds is to take none as such. In one world there may be many kinds serving different purposes; but conflicting purposes may make for irreconcilable accents and contrasting worlds, as may conflicting conceptions of what kinds serve a given purpose (11).

One may add that it is weighting or accent that creates a particular frame of reference through which all the elements of an emerging or extant world are organized and evaluated and through which one world is recognizably different from another. In this sense, power may be only one weighting principle that creates certain types of worlds among an infinity of others. One may also introduce the notion of subworlds, whose weighting principles derive from but are not identical with the overall weighting principle of an actual or an imaginary world. For example, subworlds can be constituted along historical, geographical, spiritual, psychological, religious, ethnic, political, economic, biological, sexual, physical, cosmological, and aesthetic lines, according to the specific nature of their local weighting principle.

One may also point out that not all of the relationships among alternative worlds (whether actual or imaginary) need be seen as conflictive or competitive, as Goodman and Merrell seem to imply. Thus, one may propose four basic types of relationships among alternative worlds and/or their subworlds: compatible, incompatible, commensurable, and incommensurable. Compatible worlds and subworlds have similar weighting principles or kindred, easily interadjustable, frames of reference. Examples may include the communities that belong to the same small-scale or large-scale cultures or subcultures (the tribal communities in the Amazon basin, Polynesia, Africa, and Arctica, the traditional and modern national states around the globe, and so on); the same socio-economic system (slave-labor based, feudal, capitalist, socialist, communist, and so on); the same political system

29.- See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, pp. 7-17. Further page references to this work are in the text.

(the present and former Communist states of Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the current Western democracies, and so on); the same religious system (Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Hinduist, and so forth). One can also regard as compatible the worlds and subworlds constituted on Ptolemaic, or Copernican, or Euclidian, or Non-Euclidian, or Newtonian, or Einsteinian weighting principles.

In turn, alternative worlds and their subworlds may appear as incompatible when their weighting principles or reference frames clash or are not easily interadjustable. Examples may include most of the worlds mentioned previously: small-scale cultures in relation to large-scale ones; agrarian communities in relation to industrial ones; tribal and ethnic communities in relation to modern nations or states; Western democracies in relation to East-European and other totalitarian states; Ptolemaic worlds in relation to Copernican ones; Darwinian worlds in relation to Creationist ones, and so forth. The traditional division between primitive and civilized cultures equally expresses a relationship of incompatibility. When incompatible worlds or subworlds come into contact, one of them will often either annihilate or incorporate the other, or both will fuse into a new world or subworld. Familiar examples include the fusion of the Greek and the Roman worlds, of the Judaic and Christian ones, of the West Indian and Spanish worlds of Latin America, and so on.

Alternative worlds and their subworlds can be said to be commensurable when their weighting principles and reference frames are incompatible, but essentially understandable or translatable in each other's terms. For example, many of the worlds and subworlds mentioned so far can be seen as commensurable in relation to each other. Despite their (self-) perceived incompatibility, they may appear, say, to an observer from another planet, as parts of the same universe or of what one may provisionally call a "superworld". Although their local weighting principles can differ considerably, they can be seen as having an overall weighting principle in common. What Western scientists imagine to be our physical universe(s), for instance, suggests precisely this kind of superworld. Its overall weighting principle can be described in various ways depending on the criteria involved. From an ontological standpoint, for example, this overall weighting principle may be called "phusis", or "becoming", or "matter"; even more comprehensively, it may be called "energy" or "force".

One can also imagine relations of incommensurability among worlds and/or their subworlds, when their local or overall weighting principles or frames of reference appear as incomprehensible or untranslatable in terms of each other. A good illustration of what I mean by incommensurable relationships is offered by Max Jammer's comparison between Western physics and Jaina "physics" in his book, *Concepts of Force*:

The Jainas, followers of Jina (Vardhamana), an elder contemporary of Buddha, developed a realistic and relativistic atomistic pluralism (*anekantarada*), without the slightest allusion to the concept of force, in contrast to Western science in which the idea of force plays (...) a fundamental role. In the Jaina physics, the category of *ajiva* is subdivided into matter (*puḍgala*), space (*akasha*), motion (*dharmā*), rest (*adharma*), and time (*kala*). *Dharmā* and *adharma* designate the conditions of movement and of rest respectively. Being formless and passive, they do not generate motion or arrest it, but merely help and favor motion or rest, like water, which is instrumental for the motion of a fish, or like the earth, which supports objects that rest on it. Essentially, it is 'time' that originates 'activity' (*kriyā*) and 'change'

(*parinama*), and it does so without becoming thereby some kind of a dynamic agent, something equivalent to the concept of force in Western thought³⁰.

Here Jaina "physics", based on pluralistic, nondynamic principles appears as incommensurable in relation to Western physics, based on principles of force. Indeed, Max Jammer's comparison between the two kinds of "physics" is no more (as he himself is aware) than a failed attempt to translate the Jaina concept of nature in Western terms, for the very rendition into English of Jaina words such as *anekantarada*, *puḍgala*, *akasha*, *dharma*, *kala*, *kryia*, *parinama* is a (mis) interpretation of their original meaning in terms of a vocabulary of force (matter, space, time, motion, rest, change, activity, etc.). "Physics" itself is hardly the proper word for describing the Jaina view of nature, and by putting it in quotation marks I have merely pointed to the essential incommensurability between the Western and the Jaina worlds.

The traditional Western ontological division between real worlds and fictional ones, moreover, can designate not only a relation of incompatibility but also one of incommensurability, pertaining to two unadjustable reference frames. From a constructivist standpoint, fictional or imaginary worlds can best be seen not as "non-existent objects" but as entities constituted on alternative ontological principles. In fact, their overall weighting principle can better be described in terms of "being", rather than "becoming". When compared to "real" or physical worlds (whose overall weighting principle is "becoming") they appear as indestructible or immortal; therefore, far from being "non-existent", they paradoxically belong to an enhanced order of "reality". Other examples of incommensurable worlds are the "natural" worlds in relation to the "supernatural" ones, the mystical ones in relation to the philosophical ones, the "divine" worlds in relation to the "secular" ones, and so forth. Euripides's *The Bacchae*, Cervantes's *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and Unamuno's *Niebla* are some of the most familiar examples of literary works that thematize relationships of incommensurability among worlds.

When two incommensurable worlds intersect they do not clash in the same way that incompatible worlds do. Properly speaking no "collision" takes place, and their relationship is necessarily governed by the principle of *nollo contendere*. Their intersection may either be ontologically inconsequential, as in the surrealist movie scenes in which a truck runs through a ghost, or result in a conversion of one weighting principle into the other (rather than in a complete annihilation of one of them or in a fusion of both, as in the case of clashes between incompatible worlds). It may also result in a voluntary, marginal adoption of the other's weighting principle, but this would not radically affect either frame of reference. If any "harm" or "violence" results from the encounter it is basically self-inflicted, as such a fundamental literary and anthropological document as *The Bacchae* points out³¹.

Another prime example of an incommensurable relationship is that between worlds whose overall weighting principle is power and those whose overall weighting principle is of an irenic nature. Although most of the alternative worlds that humans build and classify as "real" are power oriented, we have also imagined and constructed worlds whose weighting principles and reference frames are irenic. There are many examples of irenic imaginary

30. - See Max Jammer, *Concepts of Force: A Study in the Foundations of Dynamics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 5. For introductions to Jainism, the reader may consult Jagmenderlal Jaini, *Outlines of Jainism* (Westport, Conn., 1940; reprint 1982); and Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London/ New York, 1992).

31. - For an extensive discussion of the incommensurability between worlds in *The Bacchae*, see Spariosu, *God of Many Names*, pp. 103-139.

worlds, but only of a few "real" or actual ones, including certain Oriental and Occidental religious and/or alternative communities. It is clear, for instance, that Jaina "physics" is the expression of such an actual irenic world (in contrast to the power-oriented actual world of Western physics). One should, moreover, not conceive of the relationship between irenic worlds and power-oriented worlds as one of binary opposition, that is, as one of incompatibility. This would simply mean confusing two radically different reference frames, a confusion that can occur very easily within communities habituated to evaluate everything in terms of power. *The New Testament*, for instance, stages in detail an encounter between an irenic world and a power-oriented one. There is a constant ironic tension between Jesus Christ's mode of thought and behavior and its (mis) interpretation not only by the powers that be but also by his own disciples. Jesus's words and actions are invariably interpreted by the community in terms of a power-based weighting principle, and the radical misreading of their reference frame will culminate in the founding of the Pauline church as a power-oriented institution. The Christian historical or actual worlds have often also chosen to remain within a power-oriented frame of reference, enlisting irenic principles in the service of this frame. In fact, the entire history of Christianity can be read as a series of failed attempts to convert from a power-oriented world to an irenic kind. *The New Testament* reveals, moreover, that while the irenic or "divine" world emerges intact from the encounter with a power-oriented, "human" world, the effects of this encounter on the latter can be devastating, because of the aggressive, totalizing nature of power which cannot tolerate alterity, even at the risk of self-annihilation.

Keeping in mind Turner's theory of liminality, one can also propose a nonessentialist distinction between alternative and liminal worlds. Liminal relationships govern indeterminate ontological landscapes or grey areas located in-between alternative worlds and subworlds. These liminal worlds should not be seen as alternative worlds per se, because they have no firmly established weighting principles while their frames of reference (often borrowed from their immediate neighbors) are ceaselessly being questioned and/or dislocated. But even though they are not themselves alternative worlds, they can nevertheless generate a great number of such worlds by proposing and debating various weighting principles, complete with blueprints of their reference frames. There are numberless examples of actual and imaginary liminal worlds, including festivals, religious ceremonies and rituals, public and private games, artistic works such as novels, poems, dramas, paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, and so forth. Liminal worlds can also arise through dreams or dreamlike states, travel, pilgrimages, social and cultural upheavals, solitary retreat or confinement, voluntary or forced exile, and through the experience of birth, death, and rebirth.

Because of their fluidity, flexibility, and freedom from rigid ontological commitments, liminal worlds are ludic worlds par excellence. The liminal nature of the ludic has indirectly been pointed out, for instance, by Johan Huizinga who offers this definition of play:

A free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means³².

32.- See Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, 1950), p. 13.

One can adopt, in a revised form, several elements from Huizinga's definition of play to describe liminal worlds as well. They stand quite consciously "outside" other worlds, including actual ones and are "disinterested" in a Kantian sense, allowing themselves complete freedom to adopt any weighting principle or frame of reference they see fit. They have their own proper boundaries of time and space, on the margins of or within an alternative world or subworld. Properly speaking, however, they do not have fixed rules and do not proceed in an orderly manner any more than play does; or at least, as in the case of play, rules and order are incidental to their nature. (Here one should make a distinction between play and games, although one could argue that even games only simulate rules and orderly procedure, that is, only pretend to adopt a weighting principle and a reference frame for the sake of play.) Furthermore, as Huizinga implies about play, liminal worlds, like all other worlds, cannot arise outside or independently of specific communities, be it only a community specially assembled for a ludic occasion or a community of one (in which case a larger community always looms in an actual or an imaginary background). On the other hand, just as a community can not only engender but also be engendered by play, it can both initiate and be initiated by a liminal world.

We are finally in a position to answer the question whether literary discourse can also provide access to alternative worlds that are incommensurable with ours. Given its ludic-liminal nature, literature (as well as art in general) is ideally suited, as Wolfgang Iser has shown, to stage any kind of actual or imaginary world. Therefore, it can also point to any kinds of ontological alternatives, including irenic ones. In the end, it is up to the community or the communities that receive(s) the artistic work to move toward embracing and perhaps even actualizing some of these irenic alternatives.