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"Modes of Liminality in American Short Fiction"

Liminal stages are central to initiation rituals, which have been analyzed by anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) and Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) and elsewhere. Beyond its ethnographic use the term liminality describes processual transformations in a wider sense: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner, *The Forest* 97). Liminality is a process of defamiliarization and potential de- and/or reconstruction that takes place in time as a passing exceptional state. Such liminal stages often go along with displacements and manifest themselves in special environments. In "Of Other Spaces" (1986), Michel Foucault terms such spaces, set off from the everyday world, heterotopias: "an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another" (Foucault: 22). Liminality and heterotopology can be considered interrelated chronological or spatial formations, respectively, which correspond to linguistic and aesthetic structures. Liminality may be associated with metaphoric, heterotopology with metonymic structures (see Jakobson, Lotman, Lodge, Iser). My paper will try to demonstrate that such structures fundamentally shape American short stories which discuss interrelations between nature and culture. Quite a number of American short stories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries present a heterotopic interrelation of nature and culture which tends to collapse both terms into a liminal sphere. Such liminality exposes the constructedness of the nature-culture dyad, calls into question anthropocentrism and decenters human hegemony in ruminations on "the decline and revival of the kinship between nonhuman and human" (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 180). In Buell's interpretation, nature has become a liminal and peripheral entity which, nevertheless, is necessary as a yardstick for responsible environmental attitudes and conduct (see Buell, *Writing*).

What might be termed a poetics of liminality can be traced in short story writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in heterotopic settings and performative dynamics as well as in objects and characters condensing multiple identities. Stories such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832), Sarah Orne Jewett's "The White Heron" (1886), Sherwood Anderson's "Godliness" (1919), and Joyce Carol Oates's, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966) enable mediations of heterotopic settings by a performative dynamics of plot development. Other narratives such as Edgar Allan Poe's "Four Beasts in One - The Homo-Cameleopard" (1833), "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839), "Morning on the Wissahiccon" (1843), The Journal of Julius Rodman (1844) or "The Domain of Arnheim" (1846), Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844), Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Circumstance" (1860) and Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Castle Nowhere" (1875) condense multiple identities and thus synthesize nature and culture, humans, animals and machines. In the more recent past such condensed objects and characters are noticeable in Thomas Pynchon's "Entropy" (1960) and Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" (1968). This paper will discuss both modes of liminality: the dissolution of heterotopic boundaries by plot dynamics and the condensation of multiple identities in portmanteau characters and objects. In particular, Judy Budnitz's "Dog Days" (1998) will be discussed as an example of liminal interrelations between humans and animals.

Works Cited

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