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"The Limits of my Language': Liminal Discourse and Contingent Identity in Modernist Women's Short Fiction"

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein asserts that '*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*' (5.6). The short fiction of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, this paper will argue, explores this idea in their pervasive use of the liminal trope as an exploration of discourses of limits. Wittgenstein's further suggestion that 'the subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world' is illuminating in view of the close connections in these writers' work between subjective consciousness, language and liminal states (5.632). In Richardson's short story 'Death', published in 1924 in the *Weekly Westminster* and Woolf's 1906 tale of 'The Mysterious Case of Miss V', liminality is evoked continually in the protagonists' negotiations with the limits of discourse, of subjective experience and, ultimately, of subjectivity itself.

Liminal experience is ambiguous and paradoxical. It encompasses transitional interludes and in-between states, recurring throughout life during moments of pivotal social, cultural and individual change. Liminal incursions may be fleeting and temporal as evoked in New Year's Day, a clock chiming the hour at midnight or the transition from twilight to darkness and from dawn to day. Moreover, as the anthropologist Victor Turner suggests, liminality may be defined spatially. Distinct from marginality, which exists at the edges of structure and inferiority, which is manifest beneath it, liminality is positioned within the cracks in social structure which fall between pre-existing social norms, classifications and conventions (*Ritual Process* 128). Within these interstices, Turner argues, liminality resides as a potentially subversive 'anti-structure', thus revealing fleeting incursions into a cultural dimension in which conventions, social 'norms' and even subjective identities are shattered, dissolved and have yet to be reformed.

The implications are twofold. The removal of social structures and status confers equality, raising questions about contingent subjectivities and allowing challenges to be posed to conventional assumptions about cultural and personal identity. In its ex-centric position, however, liminality is also closely associated

with incoherence, silence, madness, alienation and death. Its 'pure potentiality', as Turner describes it, also threatens exclusion, marginalisation, and even annihilation (*Ritual to Theatre* 44).

The short fiction of Richardson and Woolf negotiates this constructive yet destructive potentiality. Their stories gesture toward a liminal, alinguistic realm which is both threatening and liberating and which eludes direct textual representation. Liminal discourses are illustrated throughout 'Death' and 'The Mysterious Case of Miss V' through emphasis on the limits of the protagonists' sense of identity, their confrontations with mortality, and their always-thwarted efforts to articulate these liminal conditions linguistically. For both Richardson and Woolf, short fiction thus provided an experimental, modernist canvas on which they sought to find a means of conveying a sense of the 'unspeakable', and in doing so, to challenge the fixity of subjective and cultural limits.

Works Cited

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