

The Threshold of the World

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Casper David Friedrich, *Woman before the Rising Sun (Woman before the Setting Sun)*, c. 1818, oil on canvas, 22 x 30 cm, Museum Folkwang, Essen

There is an essential *liminality* to the body, or, at least, to the lived character of embodiment. To understand the liminality of the body, however, one must first attend to the character of the liminal itself.¹ The liminal is that which stands

¹ Liminality has acquired a widespread useage in anthropology and cultural studies that largely derives from the work of Arnold Van Gennep (see Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Coffee [London: Routledge and Kegan

between, but in standing between it does not mark some point of rest. Instead, the liminal always carries a movement with it – a crossing, a movement towards or away from, a movement into or out of. Etymologically, 'liminal' comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, but related also to the Latin *limes*, meaning boundary, border or *limit*. In the Greek world, the liminal was the realm of both Hermes and Hestia² – two gods who meet at the threshold, one welcoming us within and the other carrying us without – into the street, onto the road, out to the *horizon* (itself understood as border or boundary).³ The lived body has this same dynamic character, opening outward to the world and inward to the self.

The lived body is not experienced as something merely 'in' the world, since it is only in and through the lived body that the world opens up *as* a world.

Paul, 1960]), and especially Victor Turner (beginning with "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," from *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp.93-111. As it is explored in this essay, however, the liminal is approached by way of a more basic phenomenological or hermeneutical approach than in terms of the anthropological framework evident in Van Gennep and Turner (although clearly the former is not absent from the latter).

² For the Romans, Lima and Limentius are the deities of the threshold, Cardea and Forculus are guardians of the door, and Janus is the god of doorways, of transitions, of beginnings and endings – combining in one something of the same twofold aspect of Hermes/Hestia.

³ See Jean-Pierre Vernant's discussion of Hestia-Hermes in *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, trans. Janet Lloyd with Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006) pp.157-196.

To take the lived body as something 'in' the world would thus be to take the body as not 'lived' at all, but something merely objectified, merely 'there'. Yet the lived body is never simply 'there' in this way – in the way a book may be there on the table or the stone on the beach. The lived body is thus not thing, not stuff, not *body* (in the sense in which the latter term appears, for instance, in Descartes, to refer to *res extensa*) – it is the movement across, and so out of, into, towards. [the movement of the liminal is not a movement grounded in the subject nor in the body-subject but that which constitutes the subject as subject]

In its dynamic character, the lived body is always 'in advance' of itself. For this reason one might be tempted to say that the lived body is not constituted by its 'here', but always by its 'there' – by that which is brought close to it, and yet which, in being brought close, is also thereby removed from distance. Perhaps one could then say that the lived body is always given over to its own *temporality*, a temporality determined primarily by what lies ahead of it, except that this *timeliness* is just as much a *spacedness*, a being oriented to and in, and such spacedness is itself an essential element in the very possibility of timeliness – as timeliness is essential to spacedness. In the lived experience of the body, spatiality and temporality are intertwined, inseparably so, so that the lived experience of the body is an experience of the timeliness of space and the spacedness of time.

The liminal is not a state in which one can remain – it is not ‘static’ at all, and so properly is perhaps not even a ‘state’. The liminal character of the lived body is thus given in the form of a constant *movement* into the world. Such movement is present even when the body appears at rest – and for this reason, one might say that the lived body is never properly at rest, but is always given over to movement, and this remains so even though when there is no change in bodily location. As it is liminal, so is the lived body intrinsically *dynamic* (in Aristotelian terms, one might say that it is characterised by *dynamis* rather than *energeia* – by potency rather than actuality). In experiential terms, it is as if we were always crossing the threshold, never entirely finding ourselves within, never entirely or finally ‘at home’. There is thus an essentially *uncanny* character to the experience of liminality and so also to the experience of lived embodiment. One might say that the liminal is the very essence of the uncanny, and that the uncanny itself is always an experience of liminality.

The way the uncanny and the liminal are connected here also shows how both are tied to the idea of the canny and the known, the familiar and the ‘at home’. It is commonplace to talk of the uncanny as the mood of modernity, but actually it is – as one might take Sophocles to suggest, especially in Heidegger’s

reading⁴ – the very mood and character of the human. The human is the uncanny – the strangest of the strange, the *unheimlich* (which is how Heidegger translates Sophocles' *to deinotaton*) – and the human is so at the very same time as the human is also the one who stands closest to the known and to the 'at home'. The uncanniness of the body, even as the body is also 'homely', reflects the character of the threshold as that which joins the strange with the familiar, the foreign with the domestic, the outer with the inner, through its very character as the threshold *of the home*. As the threshold belongs to the home, so the home already admits the uncanny within it – only in the closeness of home does the uncanny even appear.

The very nature of the threshold is to allow entrance and departure, but for it to do this, it must also withdraw in that allowance – one might say, in fact, that all allowance is a withdrawal. In this respect, the threshold, and so also the liminal, carries withdrawal within it. Moreover, in its dynamic character, the threshold is also given to being overstepped, and so to being overlooked and even disregarded. The character of the luminal as withdrawing, as overlooked, as given to a form of 'disappearance', also belongs to the character of the lived body. The body tends to withdraw in favour of that which it moves us towards – it 'disappears' in favour of the world – except, of course, when the body is itself

⁴ See Heidegger's discussion of the choral ode (the 'Ode to Man') from Sophocles *Antigone* (lines 332-375) in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.156-176.

the focus of that movement or when it impedes it. When we stumble at the threshold, when our movement through is somehow hindered, or when we simply look to attend to the threshold itself (perhaps to admire a feature of the doorway) then the threshold becomes evident to us even as its functioning *as a threshold* may be diminished or impaired. Similarly, when the movement of the body is impeded by the body itself, or when we look to the body in its movement (as when one tries to learn some new bodily technique), then the body *appears* in a way that counteracts its liminal *disappearance*, and yet in that appearance it also, in an important sense, disappears *as body* or, one might say, *as lived*. Thus when one attends to one's body as if it were a mere 'thing' or when the body itself becomes salient through some form of bodily recalcitrance or resistance,⁵ then the body appears as something *in* the world even as it nevertheless remains that by which we move *towards* and *into* the world.

As the liminal is always given over to withdrawal, so the liminal also evokes forgetfulness and even loss – something reinforced by the character of the

⁵ Does the experience of bodily pain count as an instance of this sort of bodily salience? The experience of pain certainly draws attention to the body, and to parts of the body, and so the experience of pain may lead to the becoming-salient of the body, but the experience of pain is also more complex than this alone would suggest. Pain is both an experience as well as a mode of experiencing, and as it is the latter, so it also constitutes a mode of entry into world – it thus belongs to the body as liminal as well as to the body as non-liminal.

liminal as uncertain and indeterminate, as transitional, as belonging 'between'.

As it is indeed 'between', so such a connection to loss is matched by an equal connection to hope, and to emergence and beginning. The liminal, as Janus reminds us, looks both ways. Moreover, each way turns back to back to the other, so that the end is a beginning, and the beginning an end. In the experience of the liminality of the natural world – in the indeterminate 'between' of dusk and dawn, in the onset and the clearing of weather, in the shading of sun into shadow and shadow into sun – the experienced elements, even though distinct, nevertheless evoke one another, never appearing entirely apart. So every dusk evokes a dawn and every dawn a dusk, as loss evokes hope, and hope loss.

Indeed, in the artistic engagement with the liminal, and especially in the artistic engagement with the liminality of the natural world, almost the same image may be used in one instance to evoke loss as is used in another to evoke hope – in some cases, the image may itself be indeterminate between the two (the image by Casper David Friedrich that stands at the head of this essay provides an explicit example of such ambiguity). Moreover, so powerful and so commonplace is the association of the liminal with ideas of loss and of hope, especially as given in the appearance of the liminality of nature, that its artistic presentation can all too readily slide into mere conventionality or even kitsch.

In attending to the way the liminal is connected with such moods – whether in their artistic portrayal or elsewhere – one may readily be led toward a thinking of the liminal that takes it to be associated in an essential way with death and with birth. Are not both of these exemplary of loss and hope, of ending and beginning, and are not both fundamentally liminal in character – do not both stand on the very *boundary* of the lived? Although birth and death are not unrelated to the ideas of limit and boundary that are at the heart of the liminal,⁶ still neither birth nor death are properly liminal *in themselves* – neither is to be counted as constituting a threshold that is apart from the threshold of the lived body.

The liminality of the lived body, and of the life that belongs to it, is given in its living, in its embodiment, rather than in some experience (if there could be such) of coming-to-be or passing-away. Similarly, the limits that belong to the life

⁶ Elsewhere, I have myself talked of the character of death as a limit (see, for instance, 'Death and the End of Life', in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012, pp.178-197), and although this claim is not without significance, it is a claim that also carries an ambiguity that I am here concerned to dispel. The ambiguity is one that affects both 'limit' and 'death' – it is an ambiguity that can all too easily lead to death being viewed as if it were something that stood apart from and in contrast to life. My concern here is to make clear the way in which death, and with it birth, derives from nothing other than the limit that belongs to life itself.

of the lived body, and that may be taken to bear the names of 'birth' and 'death', are not limits that exist outside of or apart from that life. Death, it has been said, is 'another country', and from it no-one returns, but if there is no return from death, it is because death is not even a country – just as birth does not point towards some other realm that comes before, and from which we arrive. In this respect, Lucretius' claim that death is *nothing*, is quite literally correct, but it is also true, in a similar sense, of birth – neither term refers to anything that is other than life, and so the ending of life is not an 'entry into' death any more than the beginning of life is a 'departure from' birth.

The fact that we commonly do treat birth and death as liminal – as two thresholds between which our lives span out, thereby taking the liminality of the lived body as if it were primarily a feature of its *temporal* structure – itself results from a tendency to treat the lived body as if it were indeed something that is given as an extended entity among other entities, defined in terms of its spatio-temporal span, and so as an entity whose life can be understood as beginning at a certain point and ending at another. In this way, birth and death are understood as points or periods of transition between different states, and the life of the body is one state among others.⁷ Such a way of understanding birth

⁷ This is one of the points of ambiguity that I noted above. There is another ambiguity that also affects talk of birth and death: they can refer to those events that occur at the

and death depends upon a way of understanding lived embodiment, and understanding life, that already abstracts from its character as lived, and from its character as embodied.

If we are not to treat the life of the lived body as merely a span between two points – if we are to retain a genuine sense of birth and death as they relate to the lived body – then we have to think birth and death differently from the usual or conventional understanding, and we must also think beginning and ending differently as well. If we say that birth and death mark the limits of the life of the lived body, they do not do so in virtue of marking the points between which that life is extended. Rather birth and death, as ontological structures rather than as particular empirical events, derive from the character of lived embodiment as already constituted in terms of its own limitation – and so in terms of its essential liminality.

The liminality of the lived body is not a matter of its being given over to some simple transition between states, but rather consists in an intrinsic movement out of, into, and towards. It involves an essential orientation towards and movement into the world. However, the entry into world is not only constant,

end and the beginning of life, as well as to the limits within which life itself is constituted. In the first sense, birth and death are events in life; understood in the second sense, birth and death simply name the limits of life itself. In neither case are birth and death anything apart from life.

and so never completed, but it is also an entry that always stands in relation to a singular location, a place, a *topos*. The threshold does not open into some indefinite or infinite space – it is neither a passage to *nowhere* nor to an immediately present *everywhere*. The liminality of the lived body thus refers us both to the limits of the life that belongs to the body, but it also refers us to the limit of that in which the body itself finds itself, and through entry into which, the body also enters into the world – not to the entirety of the world all at once, for that would be an entry into nothing, but into the world as it is always given within its proper horizon, into the world in the placed singularity of its appearance. The liminal always stands in an essential relation to place – to the topical or topological. Indeed, there is no limit without place, and no place without limit.⁸

Understood in terms of the essential liminality of the lived body, the life that belongs to that body is not limited by some externality, but by its own intrinsic character. Inasmuch as they genuinely belong to the liminal character of the lived body, and only properly appear in relation to it, then birth and death themselves derive from that same liminality, and so too from the ‘topicality’ to

⁸ Something already clearly evident in Aristotle – see *Physics* IV, 212a5-6: ‘place is ...the limit of the surrounding body, at which it is in contact with that which is surrounded’, in Edward Hussey, *Aristotle’s Physics, Books III and IV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p.28.

which liminality is also intimately bound. One might go so far as to say that 'birth' and 'death' refer only secondarily to the biological events corresponding to the emergence or cessation of an individual life. More fundamentally, and as they appear in relation to the experience of the lived body, birth and death refer to the way that embodied life already configures itself in a movement oriented to a certain place and within a certain horizon. This is why the search for the continual extension of life – and especially its infinite extension – already misunderstands the way in which limit belongs to life, and to the body, essentially.⁹ Its denial of limit must thus be counted as also a refusal of life, even its denial, since the limit of life is a limit that is life's own.¹⁰ The experience of the lived body is an experience of this liminality, which is an experience of its essential placedness, and it is in this way that it is also an experience of the openness of world.¹¹

⁹ For a more detailed argument on this matter see 'Death and the End of Life'.

¹⁰ The embrace of life *as limited* can be seen as an instance of what Nietzsche refers to as *Amor fati* (love of fate) – see eg. *Ecce Homo*, §10, in *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.258 – and its refusal can in turn be seen as also a refusal, even a hatred, of fate.

¹¹ For more on the role and nature of place that is alluded to here, see, among other works, the essays in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, as well as my *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

In its liminality, the experience of the lived body always brings with it an experience of transition, of movement, of the dynamic – and with this, an experience also of the uncanny and the familiar. In the liminality of the lived body, we experience the real limit on which our lives depend – a limit that is evident in our being given over to birth and death, to remembrance and forgetting, to hope and to loss. This liminality of the lived body is easily overlooked, and yet it can never be escaped or eliminated – in this sense, we are never wholly in the world, but always on its edge, always on our way towards it. In this sense, we are indeed always at the beginning – even when an ending seems to beckon – which is perhaps why hope must take precedence over loss, even when it seems that there is nothing left but loss. In the experience of the lived body, which is the experience of life, we are always at the threshold.