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“On the Threshold of Change”: Liminality and Marginality in Steven Carroll’s Fiction

The paper deals with Steven Carroll’s quartet of novels about a Melbourne suburb. Carroll’s original brand of realism is an attempt to capture “life in motion” and focuses on the way individuals and communities evolve. Hence his predilection for describing liminal moments in his narratives – moments when people and places are on the cusp of change. His novels are in this sense the expression of a philosophy of change as well as examples of narrative methods meant to give concrete form to that philosophy. Liminality sometimes gives way to marginality: instead of evolving with their social context, some characters retain features that make them out of place in their brave new world. They are stranded on the wrong side of liminality, a notion whose promises of resolution do not always come true.

Steven Carroll’s quartet, the so-called “Glenroy” set of novels,¹ which is focused on the lives of engine driver Vic, his wife Rita and their son Michael between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s, attempts to breathe new life into realism by developing original narrative methods that renovate the usual conventions of realist fiction and, as he put it in an interview, allow readers “to see the utterly taken-for-granted-and-familiar made unfamiliar” (*Time* 2). One aspect of this method is to focus the narrative on a particular example of an environment that is so commonplace as to be often regarded as dull and uninteresting, except perhaps for satirical purposes, namely an Australian suburb, thus confirming Brigid Rooney’s point that “Suburbia has offered writers a surprisingly rich vein for the stylistic renovation of the novel itself” (1). No less significant is the novelist’s predilection for focussing on what might be called “threshold events,” when the taken-for-granted starts turning unfamiliar. He generally presents his characters, and the community in which they live, at a moment that is part of “a future not fully formed,” as he writes in *The Art of The Engine Driver* (8), just when something of significance is “on the verge” (*Art* 283) of happening and will make a difference to their lives. The difference may turn out to be rather anticlimatic, as when Michael and his girlfriend Madeleine, who have been all night “on the brink of something momentous” (*Time* 301) which could have been a passionate romance, are in fact about to part never to meet again. But in spite of disappointing outcomes the sense that one’s life is about to change is quite often exhilarating, as shown by the epiphany Rita experiences as she makes Vic’s acquaintance: “when he told me his name and it sounded right, I said to myself, this is it [...] I felt that I’d just started to live” (*Art* 48, 51).

The idea of liminality pervades all four of Carroll’s novels, as indicated by recurring phrases such as “the moment of before and after,” (*Spirit* 264) “Poised between one thing and another,” (*Gift* 227) “that hazy zone between living and dying,” “On the threshold of change” or “the old is giving way to the new” (*Spirit* 243, 134, 234 respectively). The way change comes to human beings, and the related notion of liminality, lie at the heart of the narratives.

1. *The Art of the Engine Driver* (2001), *The Gift of Speed* (2004), *The Time We Have Taken* (2007), *Spirit of Progress* (2011) as listed in the Works Cited section.

Highlighting threshold events has various benefits for the novelist. For one thing, it makes it easier to bring out the fluidity of life because it discounts closure – what matters is not how this or that process ends but how it evolves and why it runs in a particular direction. It preserves a sense of indeterminacy or uncertainty which is very much part of how people experience the course of events in their lives. And although liminality inescapably involves the notions of “before” and “after,” by focussing on what at once separates and links them it makes for a more complex picture than this binary suggests and thus helps avoid some misleading simplicities.

The strict anthropological conception of liminality, which is defined as the condition of those adolescents who are about to go through initiation rites, boys no longer but not yet men, is a little narrow for my purpose. Liminality characterises all in-between states, when individuals and communities find themselves on the cusp of change, works in progress taking new shapes even while they bid goodbye to their old ones. The notion’s relevance in Carroll’s fiction is all at once psychological, social, political, economic and cultural, because it signifies how human beings and the communities of which they are a part grow and develop, and this is a major preoccupation of the novels. As Nathanael O’Reilly noted in respect of the area which is the focus of the major part of the narrative, “Carroll repeatedly emphasizes the evolving nature of the suburb, which is in a transitional state somewhere between a farming community and a fully-established suburb” (306). The characters themselves are also depicted in a transitional state.

Liminality is a two faced notion: as the moment when “the old is giving way to the new,” as Carroll writes (*Spirit* 234),² it looks at once forward to the future and back to the past, although the emphasis varies with the person concerned, as underlined in *The Time We Have Taken* about a Friday evening:

Everybody, either looking back to a not-so-distant time when the adventures of life were new and fresh enough to sustain storybook identities, or, like Madeleine, looking forward to when ‘real’ life can begin, or those like Mrs Webster and Rita, hovering over that blurred line that separates what was from what might be. (*Time* 148)

The liminal individual is about to change, to be transformed, but something of the abandoned old self is inevitably carried into the emerging new one. A kind of transubstantiation occurs, promising better things but not always delivering on that promise, weighed down as it is by the presence of the old in the new. Liminality heralds change but at the same time, paradoxically perhaps, it has a hint of continuity in it.

Similar circumstances can sometimes be seen as liminal – opening onto a different, more advanced phase – or as what might be called pseudo-liminal or non-transitional – marking the end of a phase but without any suggestion that some sort of renewal is to follow, as with the silence between Vic and Rita:

So we stand there beside each other, like strangers on a dance floor. And that might be fine, because we were strangers on a dance floor once and that was fun. Except then, we had it all in front of us. Silence then fed the anticipation. Silence was fun. But it’s not fun any more. Because it’s not that awkward silence that comes just before your life takes off like a rocket ship to Mars. Not that silence that comes just before all the nervous talk, when you blurt out all the things you’ve ever wanted to say because you’ve finally met

2. Cf. also phrases such as “Life Turns Another Page” or “Old time gives way to new time” (*Time* 65 and 301 respectively) which also highlight the importance of this notion in Carroll’s fiction.

someone you can say them to. No, it's not that kind of silence. It's just the familiar silence that comes after you've finally said it all. (*Art* 228)

Rita feels that her relationship with Vic has reached a dead end and there is nothing left to anticipate. Yet individuals and communities alike are always in the process of evolving and changing. The difference is that individual lives inevitably come to an end whereas communities live on a different time scale and may give the impression of going on and on, as Carroll shows with the nameless Melbourne suburb which is no less a participant in the narrative than its inhabitants: by highlighting the various phases of its evolution he suggests that this is a never-ending process.

At the end of the nineteenth century the suburb was nothing more than a twinkle in a developer's eye, a mere promise that a new community would spring up in what was then the countryside beyond the city. Then in the post-war years, stimulated by demographic growth, a proper suburb was born as part of a process that was repeated in every major Australian city. At the time when the story takes place – the post-war decades – its character is about to change radically under the pressure of modernity:

Soon the acre of land on the corner of the two main streets of the suburb, that had been Webster's Engineering, would be cleared, the factory levelled as though it had never existed, and a department store with racks of cheap clothes, the wonder of drip-dry shirts, shoes, toys and all manner of knick-knacks that nobody realised they wanted but which they soon would, will take its place [...]. And when the new department store is built, the drapers by the post office, the clothing store by the station and the small shoe shop, all of which had survived until then, will disappear from the landscape one by one, and everybody will turn to the new department store for the things they both need and don't need. (*Time* 315)

The dynamics of change are made very clear in this passage and are underlined by the use of the future tense which brings out the contrast between what is and what will inevitably be. For change to occur, for something new to come into being, something old has to die or, as Carroll wrote in *The Time We Have Taken*, “Before something can begin, something else must end” (220): the birth of the department store is made possible by the demise of Webster's factory. But if death is followed by rebirth (“a beginning can be created out of an ending,” as Carroll puts it [*Time* 318]), the birth of something new in turn leads to the death of something old – here, the small specialized shops which the store is inevitably going to bankrupt.³ This could be an epitome of the way a modern society evolves, with primary and secondary industries (agriculture with Skinner's farm and manufacturing with Webster's factory) losing ground to services industries⁴ and retail being transformed by the arrival of the one-stop store. Nor is this evolution a mere accident – it has something inevitable about it, as the death of Webster's factory has long been on the cards: “What was once a brute was now a decaying beast, dribbling its way into extinction, the unmistakable reek of death all around” (*Time* 260). Historical

3. Other writers too have of course paid attention to the process – thus Stephen Orr writing about Adelaide in *Time's Long Ruin*: “Warm, sweet-smelling shops, each containing small, blue crystals of life, growing, filling shelves to bursting point, sustaining the neighbourhood. Until, in the 1960s, some fella went and built a supermarket on Port Road. I remember everyone going over for opening day. Even the shop owners on Elizabeth Street, shutting up early so they could have a nosy. If only they'd known. Pretty soon their businesses started dropping off. It was just too easy to do all your shopping in one spot. And to get everything you needed” (17).

4. “Today's economy is very different from the 1950s, when nearly half the workforce was employed in manufacturing and agriculture, many in semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs. Now those two industries account for about one in 10 Australian workers” (Snow and Wade n.p.).

change will not be denied. It is often regarded as synonymous with progress, pushing the social and economic structures it has superseded back into marginality and so irrelevance, as Carroll suggests as he recalls the time “when the suburb sat on the frontier of the city and those low, flat paddocks of tall grass and thistle marked the margins of Progress” (*Time* 7).

In comparable fashion, Carroll focuses much of the third volume (*The Time We Have Taken*) on a group of university students at a time when Australian universities were becoming less socially exclusive but were still a passport to upward mobility, as suggested by the narrator’s remark: “they will go places, this lot” (*Time* 98). They are at a transitional stage in their lives, no longer children but not fully grown up either, poised on the edge of the professional life that awaits them, in transition in a personal sense as well as in a collective one since many, like Michael himself, are thereby leaving the ranks of the working class to join – and enlarge – the middle classes.

The process of change goes on and on, and may be seen either as a smooth, gradual type of evolution with one phase shading imperceptibly into another, or more plausibly as a series of breaks or discontinuities, so that moving from one phase to another implies disruption and often trauma, unless there are transitional moments to soften the blow. What some would regard as “the straight line of History” (*Spirit* 112) is actually a series of broken lines, of segments separated as much as joined by pivotal or liminal moments. Those moments can be entirely absent when there is a sudden, unmediated passage from one state to another, as with Paddy Ryan’s death:

He’s just had a massive heart attack. It was all over in a second [...] No time to call out. No time for any last words, if only muttered to himself. One moment he was leaning forward slightly, anticipating a mug of tea [...] The next his body convulsed and the bulk of Paddy Ryan fell back against his seat. (*Art* 237)

The lack of a transitional moment makes the whole thing more shocking, more brutal. It is not that such a development defies understanding – Paddy, a heavy drinker, was at risk of just such an attack; like Vic later, he had it coming to him – but that, because of the lack of an in-between phase, it looks like a complete and somewhat bewildering change of course. The importance of liminal moments also lies in their being signposts to the future: without them, it becomes much harder to make sense of the way in which people and places develop. The sense of standing at a crossroads, however, does not necessarily provide much illumination, as Bjørn Thomassen suggested when comparing liminal states in a strictly ritual context and in a broader social and psychological context. In the former case, the path ahead is clearly understood by the individual but in the latter there are no certainties as “the future is inherently unknown” and “There are no real ceremony masters, as nobody has gone through the liminal period before” (22).

Where individuals are concerned, successive changes inevitably lead to death, whether in timely fashion as a result of ageing or prematurely because of illness or accident. Living, and dying, is all about moving from one condition to another, and this is what gives the notion of liminality its compelling character – in a sense the human condition is almost synonymous with unceasing liminality, as American sociologist Lloyd Warner suggested with his observation of “the movement of man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother’s womb to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism” (303). Indeed, the only way to avoid the threshold effect, the moving into a new phase, is by

dying. In Carroll’s fiction, the characters go through a variety of incarnations – if I can borrow the term from Buddhist philosophy – until they finally reach what could metaphorically be called the state of nirvana, death that is, which alone guarantees eternal repose. Where Vic is concerned, those incarnations include the hopeful young man of *Spirit of Progress*, the failing husband, father and engine driver of *The Art of the Engine Driver*, the serene retiree of *The Time We Have Taken* and, at last, when he’s been tapped on the shoulder by the “Distinguished Guest,” as Carroll calls the grim reaper, a dead body, the victim of a heart attack.

Communities also move towards their end, but within a usually much longer time frame which helps sustain the notion (or the illusion) that conditions are getting better rather than worse, that change is synonymous with progress. This is an optimistic perspective which emphasizes what has been called “the mobility, or freedom of movement, that comes with liminality” (La Shure n.p.). Carroll’s novels very much engage, in a critical way, with this concept of progress, as is made clear by the title of the fourth volume, *Spirit of Progress*. It has its positive sides – more comfortable living, more solidity and well-being, as the suburb’s evolution suggests:

The suburb is no longer at the edge of the known world – as it was then – and that frontier bleakness is gone, for the frontier has moved relentlessly inland. The gardens have grown, the streets are paved, and the houses themselves have achieved a solidity that they never had when they were being thrown up, one after the other, when, all around them a suburb was being born. (*Spirit* 122)

But a closer look at the way a community evolves brings into question the optimistic perspective. As the arrival of the department store shows, progress sometimes amounts to people being driven to buy things they do not really want: the consumer society becomes dominant, and alienates human beings. Like individuals, communities grow older if not necessarily wiser, and are often bewildered by what they have become in the process – a theme Carroll highlights with his reference to the Simon and Garfunkel song “Old friends” with its line “*How terribly strange to be seventy*” (*Time* 300) that many of the novels’ characters could endorse. Liminality may soften the blows inflicted by change but it doesn’t suppress them.

Progress is all very well for those people who are prosperous and well established in their community, but it can be distressing or even deadly for those outside the mainstream, like the early Aboriginal owners of Australia dispossessed and displaced by the white colonists (as Mulligan suggests with his mural in the *Time We Have Taken*), or for Katherine as Sam painted her, “a white-haired old woman in front of her tent – her arm raised in protest, her tent pitched at the very edge of Progress” (*Spirit* 347). Change will create winners and losers and, because of the uncertainties that accompany it, it always has something disturbing about it. This, as Victor Turner recognised,⁵ can make liminality rather exciting, as when Mrs Webster experiences “the unsettling thrill that comes of stepping out of your Age and into the uncertainty of a time that doesn’t yet know what it is” (*Time* 321).

There are several levels of change in Carroll’s fiction and, as theory recognizes (Thomassen 16), liminality attaches to them all. There is the level of the individual character, that of the nameless suburb (in fact, Glenroy) where the major characters live, and fi-

5. V. Turner describing liminality as “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (97).

nally the level of Australia as a whole. All three entities do not evolve at the same pace, of course, and yet they are all interrelated. There are also occasional suggestions of the wider world of which Australia is part and where comparable changes are taking place too. The processes of change are not fundamentally different where individuals rather than communities are concerned. The difference is one of scale rather than pattern, as in a fractal structure, for individuals, even though they have their specific dynamics, are generally driven along the path of history by the same forces that operate in their community and in the nation as a whole. Thus, in the post-war years, Vic and Rita are preparing to have a child and then move from the inner city to a new suburb. It is a singular, individual experience for them but one that is mirrored in countless other families, which makes it socially commonplace. In the late 1940s and subsequent decades, the birth rate was going up:

And even though she doesn't know it yet (nobody will for some years to come), when the child does arrive and opens its eyes upon the world, she will not just be giving birth to the child alone; she will also, she will later discover, be giving birth to a generation [the Baby Boomers]. (*Spirit* 92)⁶

While there had been 120,000 births in 1938 there were almost 180,000 in 1948 and over 200,000 in 1952 (McDonald, Ruzicka, and Pyne 51). All those babies, and their parents, needed more space around them, so that the Australian Dream took the iconic form of a house on a quarter-acre block in the suburbs:

All the Vics and all the Ritas and all the children they will bring into the world will come to places such as this. It will be a fresh start. They will leave the old world behind, as well as old times, those sad and violent years, and they will strike out to cheap, open country such as this place, where the children they are bringing into the world can run all day and acquire long legs. No, Vic's is not a singular impulse. It is a collective one. But he doesn't know this yet because the movement out, from the old to the new, from the inner suburbs to the fringes of the city, hasn't happened yet. (*Spirit* 212-3)

The moment is indeed liminal, as it will transform Australian society, and full of promise, as if a brighter future was inevitably going to materialise.

Individuals change as they grow older and cross whatever threshold is appropriate to their age. Thus, as fourteen-year old teenagers, Michael and Kathleen experience the first stirrings of sexual attraction. But since they're too young to have sex (according to the conventions of the age) they find themselves in a liminal position, neither children any more nor grown-ups:

In the last few weeks they have crossed a shadowy line that neither of them knew was there until they crossed it; a line that marked the end of their childhood ways of knowing each other and marked the beginning of this other knowledge. In those few weeks she has noted those first, wondrous feelings that come with being connected. It is as though a whole new order of feeling is being born inside her. (*Gift* 148).

In similar though less thrilling fashion, Rita senses she may be too old for the kind of clothes she wears, and perhaps, almost unawares, she's moving into another phase of her life, though it isn't entirely clear if this means maturity or decline:

6. "The 1950s and 1960s were marked by an emphasis on marriage and children. During this period, both men and women married at a much earlier age. Up to 25 per cent of brides were pregnant at marriage and marriage was almost universal [...]. This marriage boom was responsible for the higher levels of childbearing" (McDonald, Ruzicka, and Pyne 43).

[S]he wonders, for one tense moment [...] if she’s crossed that shadowy line, and if her son is looking back at a mother who not only wears dresses that are a bit too good for the street, but that are now a bit too good for her. A bit too – and she drags the word out of her and silently utters it – a bit too young. (*Gift* 171)

This crossing of a “shadowy line” – repetition of the phrase in different contexts emphasizes how significant the experience is – suggests the pathos of liminality. It is not simply that as each phase in people’s lives is traversed death grows closer. It also lies in the fact that new decisions have to be taken, and new arrangements have to be made; some of the elements that were part of their lives have to be given up and others, though perhaps unwelcome, have to be embraced. People need to reinvent themselves at intervals, although it is not entirely clear to them, for the most part, when the moment has come to slough off their old skin – the line is shadowy indeed, and it takes an effort to locate it precisely. All Carroll’s characters struggle with liminality, as is the case when Webster, Michael, Rita, Vic and Vic’s mother, each in his or her own separate space, hear the same train at night:

There they are. All poised on this hot, Saturday night. Poised between waking and sleeping, thinking and doing, coming and going, beginning and ending, while the last train slips out of hearing and they are left to their thoughts and the voices that crowd their heads, poised as they are, between one thing and another. (*Gift* 227)

Life is a perpetual becoming, and therefore a perpetual in-between, fostering uncertainty and soul-searching. Perhaps, as sociologist Arpad Szakolczai has argued (16), modernity itself is permanently liminal.

Carroll’s narrative method repeatedly emphasizes this becoming by suggesting that a future lies beyond the present experienced by his characters. In the opening pages of *The Art of the Engine Driver*, for instance, Vic, Rita and Michael are walking down the street, and this walk is the preliminary stage of the project in which they are engaged, the reality of which will soon materialise: they are walking from their house down to “the Englishman’s [as their neighbour Mr Bedser is referred to] house [...] where an engagement party is to be held” (4). They’re in between houses, in a sort of suspended state that cannot last because liminality, by its very nature, is always provisional. In harmonic fashion, everything around them is in the process of moving towards a new phase: the sun “prepares to drop from the sky” (4), their suburb is emerging from the void – “the new lines of the suburb are taking shape” (6) – and their own house is gradually achieving its suburban identity, as shown by “the dirt patch that will become their lawn” (9). This presentation of reality as a becoming is emblematic of Carroll’s approach, which always looks beyond the present moment.

Carroll depicts his characters at this liminal moment, when they are about to embark on a new phase in their lives, which they often greet with optimism if not enthusiasm. But of course not all individuals actively participate in society’s evolution though all are affected by it in one way or another. Some stubbornly refuse to change when change beckons, because they disapprove of the way the world is changing, or perhaps because they are incapable of going with the flow. For them liminality turns into marginality – they can’t cross the line of change, and remain stranded on the wrong side of it. Such is the case of Katherine who, by living in a tent, sticks to the way of life she chose when she was much younger even though this way of life has become inappropriate both in terms of her person (she is grown old and frail and needs more creature comforts than

can be provided by living alone in a tent) and her place (she pitched her tent on a block of land which used to be part of the countryside but is becoming suburban): “the idea of an old pensioner living by herself in a tent on the frontier of the city (neither city nor country, but on the edge) is vaguely intriguing. Even quaint” (*Art* 25). Katherine becomes “a curiosity” (61), “beyond social convention” (124) – a phrase that amounts to an apt definition of marginality.

Much the same can be said of farmer Skinner, who looks like a relic from a by-gone age: “He wears the kind of canvas trousers and collarless shirts that nobody wears any more,” (*Art* 34) and is a curiosity too: “He’s just outlived his time. Anybody who outlives their times looks funny to everybody else” (44). His farm is part of the same perspective – superseded, anachronistic and thus mostly irrelevant: “The city has not yet reached it, but it has the look of a place that is about to disappear and pass into local history” (95).

Thus, what some characters experience as liminality – the feeling that they are about to enter a new phase – is experienced as marginality by others: for their part, they are not going to change or enter a new phase, estranged as they are from the values which are gaining the upper hand; they are becoming outsiders, with no prospects but death and annihilation (a point reinforced by their childlessness). Their liminality carries the sign of death, as Sam captured in his portrait of Katherine: “he’s painted her as though she has entered that hazy zone between living and dying” (*Spirit* 243). They know they have no future in the new society that is taking shape before their eyes, as Katherine realises as she watches the pride of Victorian Railways passing by: “This is the train they call *Progress*. And she gazes upon it with a kind of wonder, as though being granted a glimpse of the future. A glimpse of a future, moreover, that she will never enter” (*Spirit* 267). The marginality she embodies contains a premonition of death. It is a reminder of how things used to be but, except perhaps as an exercise in nostalgia, it has no lesson to offer in respect of the present or the future. And yet their marginality has its uses too. Not only does it confer on those who embody it, like Skinner or Katherine, the ascetic dignity of those who have enough strength of character to make a perhaps quixotic stand against the irresistible tide of change, but their eventual defeat helps propel someone else forward: Katherine’s block of land will pass into Vic and Rita’s hands, and turn into their home.

Characters such as Katherine and Skinner might be regarded as ghosts – creatures from the past that haunt the present and “lie at the threshold between present and past, between life and death, between presence and absence” (Joseph-Vilain and Misrahi-Barak 15). Neither character can find his or her way through the liminal space, and they lose most of their relevance, achieving only a ghostly presence; they are reminders of how things used to be and persist only as traces such as memories of Skinner’s farm or Katherine’s photograph. As ghosts, it should be pointed out, they have little of the postcolonial about them, since the processes that turned them into spectral figures have to do with urban sprawl and ageing rather than colonisation, and can be seen to operate in all kinds of contexts. The true postcolonial ghosts, in Carroll’s quartet, are the displaced Aborigines whose dispossession underlies the progress of European civilisation in Australia. They appear only briefly, on the edge of the mural painted by Mulligan by way of celebrating the centenary of the suburb. The mural is supposed to show how much progress has been achieved over the last hundred years, but the painter subverts

the good burghers’ self-satisfaction (“It is their story and they have come to witness it” [*Time* 305]) by re-introducing the original occupiers of the land, now reduced to a shadowy, marginal presence that is truly ghostly, confined as they are on the wrong side of liminality though haunting the present, “Written out of the picture and written out of the grand story it tells” (*Time* 309). As Joseph-Vilain and Misrahi-Barak argued, ghosts “are often the manifestation of a past which cannot pass and resurfaces into the present in the only guise allowed to it: the spectral” (16).

For other characters, especially those who, by virtue of their youth, have their eyes on the future, liminality is exciting even though the moment may be brief as when Sam is sailing out of Melbourne, bound for Britain and fame: “This is it. As they cut through The Rip, Sam knows this is the moment of before and after” (*Spirit* 264).

The promises of the future are not always fulfilled, however, and what felt like a liminal moment – being on the verge of something big, something thrilling – may turn out to be an illusion. Such is the case of Michael’s cricketing ambitions, his burning desire to become a fast bowler. It is a dream so dear to his heart that he is convinced it is about to come true: “Already Michael is living for that moment when he feels the ripple of the perfect delivery passing through him and he tastes that moment just before it happens” (*Gift* 32-3). But this is more of a bridge to nowhere than a truly liminal moment, as Michael will never actually bowl this fabled ball. As a cricketer he can only be marginal. The turning point occurs towards the close of *The Gift of Speed* when Michael, who dreams of owning proper cricket boots, buys a pair that is wrong for him – they are batsman’s, not bowler’s boots, and far from helping him, they will put paid to his cricketing ambitions. In a perhaps less significant way, it sometimes happens that the phase liminality was supposed to usher in somehow fails to materialise, as when Mrs. Webster and Rita, employer and employee, kindred spirits but not close enough to be friends, are “hovering over that blurred line that separates what was from what might be. Needing only the slightest of nudges to cross over” (*Time* 148). But the nudge does not happen, and their relationship, though close, will never evolve into friendship. They will remain marginal to each other.

Those pseudo-liminal moments are often full of pathos because they are synonymous with disappointment, hopes being dashed. This is the case with Michael, who fixes on cricket as his path to adulthood, and never quite gets there. His botched attempts to become a speed bowler mirror his inconclusive relations with the opposite sex, whether Kathleen (*The Gift of Speed*) or Madeleine (*The Time We Have Taken*). Michael is permanently on the verge of something that will never happen. This is also the case with Michael’s father Vic, whose ambition is to drive the luxury train known as the Big Wheel, and who is persuaded that the moment is within his grasp, despite his poor health: “But as much as he knows he shouldn’t be driving, he also knows that his dream is now so near he can almost see his name on the Big Wheel roster. Probably only months, possibly weeks away” (*Art* 58). Like Michael, Vic will be rudely disappointed, and will end his career with his dream unfulfilled.

If liminality is that transitional moment just before the future materialises as a new phase in one’s life, there is for some characters no reason why this future should be a happy one, or at any rate a development they might look forward to. As Thomassen put it, “In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome” (6). The future might prove wholly catastrophic, as it does with Doug, killed by a runaway car, or turn out to

be just more of the same bad stuff that characterized the past. Vic's way of walking is indicative of the doubts he entertains about what may be in store for him:

[I]t is not a walk that embraces the future. Rather, it is one that reluctantly presses forward, as if there is nothing else to be done, no other way, a walk that always acknowledges in its hunched weariness, the distinct possibility that any one step might mark the return of disaster and misery. (*Art* 162)

Instead of progress, one might encounter regression. For all that, true liminal moments are like milestones that mark significant stages in the characters' lives, and help make sense of the whole process. One is left puzzled when those moments come and go unnoticed, so undramatic that they can't be identified, as when Vic and Evie find themselves dancing together with no idea of how they got there: "Did she ask me to dance? Did I ask her? Did we just start? I don't know, but we're dancing..." (*Art* 240).

Carroll's novels owe a great deal to Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope – the combination of time and space which defines a fictional world. Places can be liminal in a geographical or a historical sense but in the end these are but the two sides of the same coin.⁷ The suburb where much of the narrative is located is a prime example of liminality, located as it is on "that hazy boundary where the darkness of the country merges with the illuminated city night" (*Art* 176). But the city's development will push the boundary back, so that the moment is no less liminal than the place or, rather, they are aspects of the same liminality: it is only "for these few years" that the suburb "will tremble between town and country" (*Art* 268). Some ten years later, in the next volume of the saga, the narrator observes that "The suburb is no longer at the edge of the known world – as it was then – and that frontier bleakness is gone, for the frontier has moved relentlessly inland" (*Time* 122). In similar fashion, the coastal town to which Vic retires will inevitably be overtaken – and spoilt – by development, so that Vic knows he is witnessing an in-between phase which in a way matches his own liminality as he stands at death's door: "Vic knows he won't be around to witness the whole place being buggered up" (*Time* 51).

On a rather broader scale, Carroll's novels show the whole country on the cusp of change – the sense of excitement generated by the post-war years or the hesitant taking up of multiculturalism as a consequence of the large-scale immigration programme which brought hundreds of thousands of non-British migrants to a country that still thought of itself as fundamentally British.

This conception, coupled with Australia's geographical location at the antipodes of Britain, makes the country inescapably marginal: post-war Australia feels exiled on the margins of the British Empire, a place where nothing of significance happens, removed from what Carroll calls "The centre of Things" (*Spirit* 299). Hence the burning desire of creative individuals like Sam to leave the margin for the centre, and Sam's exhilaration when his dream comes true: "It was wonderful. Thrilling. The most wonderful time to be alive. To be at the heart of things, to attend the funeral of the old ways and to watch a new government take over the parliament and the spivs take over the streets" (*Spirit* 300). But Australia's marginality, unlike Katherine's or Skinner's, is provisional: the rite of passage that is the advent of multiculturalism will usher in a new Australia, one that, however reluctantly, is prepared to admit there is more to it than its British

7. "Speaking very broadly, liminality is applicable to both space and time" (Thomassen 16).

heritage. The large scale immigration of continental settlers bringing different cultures is going to give the country a different, more mature face.

The ambiguous response to the unsettling development that was the post-war immigration programme is very much in evidence in the scene where the denizens of the suburb gather to watch the Miss Universe 1961 pageant on TV, and are delighted when the Australian candidate wins:

Everybody agrees that it is a good thing, a fine moment, that this woman – the most beautiful woman in the world – is ours. Her name [Tania Verstak in actual fact, though the novel does not specify it] – it is true – looks and sounds like the names of the Ukrainian family opposite [...]. But she is ours, and everybody nods that it is a good thing. There is a silence, then someone suggests it's a pity, though, that she isn't really one of us. Silently nodding, everyone agrees. It's a pity, this driver friend of his father adds – encouraged by the general agreement – that she isn't a real Australian. (*Gift* 112)

Immigrant groups often find themselves in a liminal condition by virtue of their being positioned between an old and a new culture (Thomassen 17). They both belong and don't belong. Ambiguity is often associated with liminality, which is thus apt to create uneasiness – one knows what one is leaving behind, but not what is to come. The beautiful woman is both “one of us” and not “really one of us.” The fact that she is an Australian citizen but has what was then regarded as an un-Australian (*i.e.*, not Anglo-Celtic) name makes her a sort of hybrid, someone who, despite her passport, remains betwixt and between, neither a foreigner nor a true-blue Aussie, thus confirming the point made by Victor Turner that “liminal individuals are polluting, and thus dangerous, to those who have not gone through the liminal period” (La Shure n.p.). This is also the case with the young journalist, George, who will end up as editor of Melbourne's major newspaper but who, in 1945, is just embarking on his career and finds himself in a liminal position from the class point of view: “He is what the ideology of the day regards as that most slippery of customers, the petit-bourgeois man. Neither working class nor middle class. Fleeing one and aspiring to the other. A deserter to one and an upstart to the other. Not to be trusted” (*Spirit* 115). This illustrates Martine Segalen's contention that the liminal individual “eludes sociological classification because he is located in an in-between” (qtd. in Delmas). Much the same could be said of Rita, a working class woman with aspirations, who aims to improve her social status and projects an image of upward mobility, what with her dresses that are a bit too good for the street, as Carroll repeatedly emphasizes, or the French windows she has put in at the front of the house. Her liminal status is made quite apparent in her relationship with Mrs. Webster, who embodies a kind of Australian aristocracy. Rita, her employee, feels a real closeness to her, and there is a good deal of empathy between the two solitary women. Yet a barrier remains, and Rita never crosses the line which would have turned her into Mrs. Webster's friend. She remains precariously suspended between her working class origins and her middle class aspirations (which, it is suggested, she will manage to fulfil later in life). This very liminality makes her suspicious and unsettling, a sort of pollution in the eyes of her neighbours – who does she think she is? The dresses and the French windows mark her as different, “and so the street always took them as an insult,” Carroll observes (*Time* 61).

The changes that Australian society experienced in the post-war years had a destabilising effect for some people: the country they were used to was still broadly recogni-

zable but no longer precisely the same. Configurations of class, ethnicity and gender were evolving and this required the citizens to adjust, always a difficult exercise but an inescapable one in liminal situations, since these are “characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (*Horvath et al. n.p.*).

One of the momentous changes that happened in Australia’s history in the course of the second half of the twentieth century was the coming to power of Labor leader Gough Whitlam in 1972, after twenty-three years of Conservative governments. Carroll’s novels do not deal with this phase but, true to their liminal spirit, they insist on its looming inevitability. Even though they cannot guess the precise shape of things to come, all the characters sense that Australia is about to enter a radically new age:

It is written into all of them – the mayor, Mrs. Webster, Peter van Rijn, the rotting hulk of Bruchner, and Michael and his kind – that this Whitlam will one day rule. And, even though he can’t know if the length of his rule will be short or long, the mayor is convinced that the country, and therefore the suburb will never be the same again once the mountain [Carroll’s code word for Whitlam] prevails. (*Time* 272)

In time-honoured fashion, an old order is giving way to a new one, requiring one to adjust and re-arrange one’s priorities. This has always been the burden of Carroll’s message.

Why did Carroll choose to privilege liminal moments in his fresco of Australia between 1945 and 1970? The narrative relevance of this method in terms of realism is clear: focussing on the moment just before change occurs is a way of illuminating this change, of making sense of it by giving visibility to the turning points. But, as Carroll’s novels make it abundantly clear, those turning points can generally be identified in retrospect only, when their outcome has already materialised. The characters themselves, although they may sense they have reached some important crossroads, have no way of knowing what is in store for them. This can be regarded as a compelling picture of life in motion, the capture of which was Carroll’s ambition. It should be seen in conjunction with the novelist’s habit of representing, in the manner of a bird’s eye view, what is going on in various places at a given moment – what I have described elsewhere (Pons 20), in reference to the doctrine developed by French writer Jules Romain, as his “unanimism.” This consisted in representing as simultaneously as possible the developments occurring in several individual lives in order to arrive at the very texture of life. The effect of this is to counterbalance the view that what happens to this or that character sets them apart from their fellows and turns them into specific cases, thus downplaying the connections between individuals that make up the social fabric. While there is such a thing as an individual odyssey, it is also the case that no man is an island, and change is both an individual and a collective experience. Life is a permanent state of flux, here, there and everywhere, and this is what Carroll’s narrative method strives to capture by highlighting liminal moments.

Through the prism of liminality and marginality, then, it is the human condition that Carroll focuses upon, a condition that is contextualised in a recognisably Australian way with his pictures of a society in transition.⁸ This combination of the universally human with the specifically Australian gives Carroll’s narratives their rich suggestiveness.

8. This Australianness is expressed in particular through the attention lavished on the progress of suburbia, which is a major aspect of Australia’s development and part of the postcolonial topos of how civilisation was implanted on a

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virgin land. This topos is exemplified by the reference to the “open field” with which history is supposed to begin: “An open field, [...] waiting to receive the footprints of settlers. Settlers who will carve something out of this open field” (*Time* 308). Needless to say, Carroll’s narrative debunks this complacent point of view.