"Literature as Ritual. The Ritual Stakes in Contemporary Literature"

Watthee-Delmotte, Myriam

Abstract

Concepts drawn from Anthropology allow us to probe the multiple ways in which ritual and literature are related. Firstly, by focusing on the intrinsic parameters of textual analysis, one may ask: how does a text construct a certain representation from within itself, and how does it define the role of the author, the position of the reader, and the modalities and boundaries of their interaction? Secondly, by focusing on contextual elements, one may inquire, in turn, about the beliefs and values that are brought into play as well as the modes of legitimation. Building on both the bedrock of memory (the substratum that gives an identity to a culture) and the emotional dimension of the text (speech act), literature is the author’s wager that communication and sharing are possible with a reader who, while unknown, may be expected to become a kindred spirit with whom the author may form a collective “we”, thus transcending temporal and existential limitations.

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Résumé

L’approche anthropologique autorise à analyser la littérature en tant que processus ritualisé. La question du fonctionnement rituel de la littérature peut s’envisager en regard de ses aspects internes (comment un texte construit-il de l’intérieur une représentation et détermine-t-il la fonction de l’auteur, la place du lecteur, les modalités et enjeux de leur interaction ?) et contextuels (quels sont les croyances ou valeurs concernées, les modes de légitimation convoqués ?). En jouant tout à la fois sur des substrats mémoriels (marques identitaires à l’égard d’une culture) et sur la dimension émotionnelle (performative), l’œuvre se présente pour l’auteur comme un pari sur la communication et le partage possibles à l’égard d’un lecteur inconnu, mais pressenti comme ce semblable avec qui peut se constituer un « nous » qui transcende les frontières et les époques.

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The points of intersection between literature and ritual, or to be more precise, the relevance of ritual for contemporary literature, have received surprisingly little attention from scholars. The first steps in this investigation were taken a long time ago when the theme of ritual initiation received special interest thanks to Simone Vierne’s publications. The theme of initiatory rites indeed often constitutes a basic ingredient of literary texts that address the great questions concerning our human condition. What has so far been neglected, however, is the sense in which writing itself presents the reader with ritualized forms. The implications of grasping this dimension of literary output greatly affect the task of the reader who is confronted with the hermeneutics of novels that take the form, for example, of diaries or letters. Two significant elements come to the fore: on the one hand, the impact that the thematic presence of a rite seems to have on the structuring of a narrative; on the other, the homology that seems to exist between the act of reading itself and a ritual event. This leads to the discovery that the use of profane writing may have the same effect as that of ritual language.

After having studied rituals, their sacred and profane manifestations, the way they function, their expected effects, the necessary conditions for them to take place, and other related issues, it seems that Claude Rivière’s definition, which is itself derived from Jean Cazeneuve’s, has the advantage of offering a synthesis that can be applied to both sacred and profane rites: “Rites are always to be regarded as a sum total of individual or collective actions that tend to be based on certain rules, involve the human body (through words, gestures or postures), are more or less repetitive, have for their performers and usually also their witnesses a strong symbolic meaning based on their (not necessarily conscious) identification with values related to social choices they deem important, and of which the expected effect does not depend on a purely empirical logic defined exclusively in terms of cause and effect.” This elaborate definition allows one to make a clear distinction between rites based on a code and routines formed by habit: the symbolism that is involved and the axiological exaltation have an effect that transcends the purely pragmatic.

A rite can be analyzed by using parameters that also apply to literary analysis. In the social anthropology of religions, a rite is studied in terms of, among others,

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a temporal sequence of actions, a system of interactions between roles, a teleological system of values, a number of means directed towards a particular purpose, or a system of communication. These elements invite us to reconsider some theories of textual analysis and reading strategies, but also, because a rite is situated in the first instance in the realm of concrete human actions, to look at “mediology” (Debray) and the sociology of the book. The phenomenon of ritual thus gives us a powerful lever with which to raise questions of literary analysis that have often been neglected, and have re-emerged only recently in the context of semiotic enquiry. Most especially, let us cite the investigation of the values communicated by a text and their emotional charge, energizing the text as a speech act.

It is in this area, namely that of the texts themselves, that emerged the formulation of the theoretical issues: specifically the literary texts that take the risk of raising the question of the Absolute, or of setting out the stakes for a definition of an identity negotiated in a dialogue with the Other/other (whether the word is spelled with or without a capital letter), or those that venture into the problematic territory of expressing a traumatic experience. These types of text never pretend to be more than concrete manifestations of the general issue that is at stake here. Reflecting upon the way such texts are structured, interpreted by the reader, created as well as received, has allowed us to emphasize certain boundaries and aspects of a method of literary analysis that focuses very specifically on ritual behaviour.

Until recently, contemporary occidental authors were marked by a traditional education anchored in Christianity, and by a culture in which rites associated with politics, the economy and social interactions acquired legitimacy, often implicitly or in a veiled manner, on the basis of religious foundations. What do these writers do with these foundations? To what extent does the presence or the lasting effect of ritual support or limit the constructs of the literary imagination? These are the principal issues that may demand our attention.

In several literary texts written from the end of the 19th century to the present day, we find rites as literary motifs. These motifs can either take the form of ritual patterns that are obviously religious (such as sacraments, prayers or the liturgy), or of mythical images evoking the sacred and understood as ritual archetypes (the struggle with an angel, the descent into Hell, etc.) or of profane rituals (mourning, combat, the use of a transitional object, the rite of passage in texts expressing hope for the future, the grotesque that through laughter suggests the possibility of regeneration, etc.). One may focus these interest on rites in which either the spoken word plays an important role (confession(s), oration), or the written word (diaries, letters, wills...). Authors often bear witness to the danger of “ritualism”, and to the pitfalls of fetishism or idolatry, which, among the literati, often acquires the shape of Bovarism. This analysis is a starting point for an inductive process of reasoning directed towards an investigation of the extent to which literature belongs to ritualization in the strict sense.

In the course of this investigation, we find that established rites may function as models. This is certainly the case as far as religious rites are concerned, whose meaning has already been put to the test. Being members of a civilization

with Judeo-Christian roots, the writers are by no means oblivious to the cultural heritage of the religions, whether they count themselves among the faithful or not. In this context one can explore some ways in which confessions and prayers, for instance, seem to reappear in literature. More generally, literature may also have an impact thanks to profane rites that shape society in general and the concrete exchanges between individuals. It may provoke an emotional response, and play a unifying role. The rite, which tends to limit the arbitrary aspect of the sign (Saussure), may also function as a bulwark against non-sense. However, ritual references can hardly be the rule; they can only be a possibility. It is perfectly possible for literature to refer to rites, and this reference is not necessarily a conscious one.

As soon as a rite starts taking place, the entire mechanism is set into motion. In the same way as an isolated element of the mythical narrative implies the semantic dynamics of the myth as a whole, every single allusion to a rite is potentially structural and not just thematic. Every ritual indeed comprises a series of rules by means of which certain desired effects are produced. While there is room for improvisation on its margins, a ritual depends above all on faithfully reproducing a model that is relevant precisely because it bears symbolic meaning, even if the meaning never becomes fully conscious. The rigidity upon which the symbolic content of the ritual elements (ritemes) depends for its effectiveness imposes fixed landmarks and roles, granted that these may taken on a variety of outward dress. This is why studying ritual as a thematic component invites us to investigate the structure of a given text. More often than not, the structure is eloquent in itself and may even actually reproduce the ritual that it evokes. It goes without saying, however, that the inner logic of the text remains dominant: there is no subalternation of literary production to the logic of anthropology or to ritual practice, which indeed a text may chose to contest. To the extent that literature is the verbalized form of the Imaginary, its first allegiance is to the way in which the Imaginary will inscribe itself into language – into a narrative or poetic event that are irreducibly unique.

The question of the links between literature and ritual behavior may be articulated through three essential questions that correspond to three fundamental parameters: the functional aspects of the ritual (why is there a rite?), its operational aspects (what does a rite do?) and its cognitive aspects (what does the rite reveal?). Needless to say, these three aspects interact constantly.

Why is there a rite? The answer to this question is most often linked to the unifying function of the rite. This applies to issues as diverse as the technique of citations, which may initiate an ironic use of a literary rite, or the commemoration of, for example, the mystery of Christ, which may give evidence of a fascination with the language of liturgy. On the one hand, writers want to include their work in the process of remembering (the citation, for instance, brings to mind an entire literary tradition). On the other, this commemoration is a way of facing what will become of the human race. In other words, the ritual practice needs to articulate

past, present and future. It includes the work as well as its author in an imaginary community.

To the question “What does a rite do?”, there are many answers. Bernard Kaempf summarizes them in the following terms: “The rite socializes and identifies, produces meaning and makes things clear. It reassures or strengthens the subject, allowing him or her to pick up the challenge of the present.” Since the publications of Jean Cazeneuve, it has generally been accepted that the primary effect of a rite is anxiolytic. In literature, one can find the traces of its efficacy in the way it deals with crises, whether these are the result of the shock of History, of a confrontation between equals, or a feeling of inner disintegration. Let us emphasize that these experiences, while they are thematized textually, are true and live experiences for the author. Does it follow from the presence of ritualized processes in literature that “ritual mimesis brings about real effect”, to cite cardinal Danielou? The effectiveness of ritual with regard to acts of mediation, appeasement and instauration depends radically, as it turns out, on what Louis-Marie Chauveret terms its heterotypical character. Through its language, objects, postures, etc., a ritual succeeds by conveying its participants “elsewhere”, outside of life. This key aspect of ritual effectiveness is what Victor Turner and Jean-Yves Hameline have characterized as “liminality.” In the realm of the imagination, one orders and comes to terms with what remains out of reach in the real world, hoping that on the latter the imaginary act may have some impact afterwards. Hope comes out of what Blanchot has called “the Literary Space.” However, the writer can hardly offer more than a substitute or subterfuge, which sometimes accentuates his powerlessness even more.

Rites communicate an essential message to its users: “One can only define a rite after having defined faith itself”, Durkheim declares. For a rite to take place at all, it needs to be based on shared values. Texts, like rites, can only be decoded by initiated readers who recognize the same premises. This symbolic community corresponds in literature with the “interpretative community” defined by Stanley Fish. The rites an author sets into motion thus show how he has appropriated for himself the cultural legacy he shares with his environment. Literary works can express a fascination with the effectiveness of rites, as well as a fear of their loss of energy, the desire to redefine the roles, or the worry about the secularization of the liturgical act. Those works may even denounce their own rites, point an accusing

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finger towards Bovarism, and demand that the idols of the past, whether historical or mythical, be laid to rest.

For the contemporary writer, the phenomenon of literary creation appears to be a kind of interface between a legacy of the past (Genette argues that every literary text is a “palimpsest”12) and the demand that it should intimate what has hitherto never been revealed. Rituals have the ability to sustain this tension between a heritage that begs for acceptance and a singularity in need of a new pathway. This phenomenon implies that the work be distributed among a circle of readers who themselves participate actively in a ritualized process.

It is the author himself who takes the initiative of writing and it is he who supposes that his text will be read by a third party. In this sense, as the author is the master-artisan, the choice of ritual processes belongs to him. And what he has at his disposal are the tools of symbols. Works of mediation themselves point to the rules that we obey unknowingly in the cultural context that has been put in place by the Book (among other facts, because the book was initially a liturgical object and thus still retains today a certain authority). On this cultural basis, which reflects historicity and derives its orientation from the world, narrative structure translates the landmarks of a linear trajectory, which is to say that it represents the linear progress of time to the reader. As Umberto Eco has shown, the author entrusts himself to the reader’s “competences”. The notion of interpretation entails a dialectical exchange between the author’s strategy and the “ideal reader’s”13 response. It follows that, quite apart from the norms of a given linguistic community, what is required for meaning to be derived from a text is a cognitive and emotional connection14 that weaves itself by means of the exchange that constitutes “reading”. The poiein, namely the imaging and esthetic agency of language, plays a key role in shaping this crucial emotional connection: the author thus deliberately shuns routine forms of speech and subverts the ordinary rules of language in order to communicate precisely what cannot be conveyed if ordinary forms are obeyed. In finding new expressions, he calls forth new possibilities from the depths of language and exploits its limitless riches and mystery. It is on this basis that Jean Burgos established his “poetics of the Imaginary”, namely that a poetic text is simply “a peculiar sort of rite […] allowing the author, and then the reader, to rediscover the realm of the sacred and thus escape from profane time.”15 The same idea of experiencing writing anxiolytically is found in Marthe Robert16 and Paul Ricoeur17, as well as in Christian Chelebourg, who, in his “Poetics of the subject”18, declares that every literary work is a “symbolic self-portrait” of the author, elaborated in the hope of repairing life’s problems through sublimation.

From this perspective, what are the principles of ritual action in the phenomenon of literature? An author writes in order to be read. He or she proposes

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a textual itinerary in the hope of remaining meaningful to those who will inhabit
the world’s uncertain future and who will be able to give ever new interpretations
of what they read. The author’s gamble is that every new reader will bring his or
her own proper competences and cultural horizon so as to share with others a
distinctive “feintise ludique” (Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s definition of fiction). New
readers will join the author again and again in this “potential space” (Winnicott’s
term) for the times pan that it takes to read through it, thus forming an open-ended extension of reading, a relational network that is not institutionalized but
instead open to unpredictable renewal. The author’s call stems from the capacity
to share experience, intellectual engagement and emotion. The author calls forth
a need in us to identify ourselves, either as an “I” or as a collective “us”. And the
community that is constituted will manifest itself through a new ritual action,
namely through the retrieval and practice of citation. This may appear to be mere
ritual “tinkering”, but ever since Levi-Strauss, the idea is not without its own let-
ters of nobility…

Now as far as the conditions for performing a rite are concerned, one
might consider first the elements that give the author the authority of a master
of ceremonies. In this respect, a study of collective representations seems indis-
peniable. One cannot avoid taking note of the fact that the exploration of the
imaginary has been, in this respect, subject to an evolution. If the image of the
author was a highly respected object of study in the 19th century, one remains
very remote from this approach in our own day and age. Claude Abastado has
underlined how significantly the myths of the writer determine the pathways
of literary interpretation. But the author’s authority can also be defined on the
basis of internal criteria, dependent as it is on the way it is engendered by the
text itself, according to tactics that can be decoded by semiotics. Through their
strategies of narration and enunciation writers reveal, whether consciously or
unconsciously, the private images they have formed, complete with their anoma-
lies. These strategies include the image the writers have of the near or remote
readers, but the latter remain free to decide whether to recognize themselves in
that portrayal or not.

Thomas Pavel sketches a tentative answer to the question of the reader’s
motivation by using the notion of “ritual emotion.” In doing so, he touches
upon a still largely unexplored aspect of literary theory: the emotional or sen-
sorial aspect of the reading process, seen no longer as an exclusively cerebral
activity but as way of connecting with the medium and using one’s aesthetic sen-
sibility. Although Jean-Yves Hameline has nicely tried to synthesize the religious
aspects of the “poetics of ritual”, the study of ritual forms in poetry is a far more
random affair because of the huge difference that separates the grave concerns
of institutionalized religion from individual poetic practices, which are marked
by their relative freedom and love of play. In the case of literature, if something
more is involved than the mechanical effectiveness of a code, if something
moves the reader’s heart or sets into motion some of the symbolic riches of a

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given interpretative community, it is thanks to the combination of esthetic, mediologic and sociologic powers that bear us to the “voluptuousness of texts” that Barthes is fond of evoking. Moreover, axiological systems that are active in a text may be analysed through sheer sympathy, as Vincent Jouve has shown, based on Michel Picard’s idea of three modes of reading. According to Thomas Pavel, these values and flavors are shared with the ideal reader progressively, as time unfolds, and as different readers seek out different registers of distance, relevance and intoxication in different proportion.

In short, the relationships between rite and literature become clearer when one focuses, in the first place, on the parameters of intrinsic analysis of texts: how does a text construct from within itself a certain representation, and how does it define the role of the author, the position of the reader, as well as the modalities and boundaries of their interaction? And when one focuses, in the second place, also on the contextual elements: what beliefs and values are involved, what are the modes of legitimization? Building on both the bedrock of memory (the substratum that gives an identity to a culture) and the symbolic dimension of the text (which opens up both the present and the timeless), literature is the author’s wager on communication and sharing becoming possible with a reader who is unknown, but expected to be that kindred spirit with whom the writer might constitute a “we” and thus transcend frontiers and periods in time.

Whether its focus is spiritual or not, the work thus appears like a bet taken on an exchange supported by language against the power of the void that lies in wait for all human life. There are no limits to the number of times a text that is on offer can be taken up again, and each time what is at stake is the negotiation of a relationship with an Other, whether in the shape of Time the Destroyer of human beings, as Jean Burgos suggested, or various other possible avatars of what remains beyond our control.

Nevertheless, if literature raises this fundamental question, it comes to it at an angle, rather than addressing it head-on as do theology or philosophy. This is why, when literature happens to meet religions on its path, its only aim is to play at imitating them, and when it evokes the impact of rituals, it can do no more than use their structure for support and be some kind of counterpoint to them. Jean-Marie Schaeffer contrasts literary activity to pragmatic representations on the basis of its playful character; we engage in literature freely and for the intrinsic pleasure that it gives to us. But we should emphasize that this satisfaction itself belongs to the realm of the ritual, because it is part of the dynamics of give-and-take. There is no writer without a reader, no pleasure in reading without recognition. We can therefore give the task of concluding to a writer, Witold Gombrowicz, who clearly understood one of the essential forces behind literary rituality when he declared in his journal: “We have to know to delight in the word.”

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Literature as Ritual

Ik literature generally dares to speak, it is not at all because it is certain of its truth, but only because it is certain of its delight.”

Myriam Wattthee-Delmotte

Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (FRS - FNRS)
Université catholique de Louvain - Louvain-la-Neuve


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