

Rituals and Readings¹

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Three overlapping activities will be discussed here: How do works of literature enter people's lives, how are they taught, and how are they studied (more specifically, how do schools of criticism come into existence)? The three examples all raise large questions, and little more can be offered here than suggestions of how answers might look, and the rough sketch of a research program.

In dealing with these examples, the notion of *ritual* will be crucial. In important respects it is different from those that have been common in literary criticism (cp. Hardin's useful survey). Northrop Frye and René Girard, for example, focus on how works of literature *represent* elements of ritual and thus make its vicarious experience possible; one might say that they study ritual *in* literature. Even where literature *as* ritual is considered, the almost exclusive concentration on the text and the reading process restricts the critics' field of vision; Hardin, for example, doubts "whether it makes sense to think of the lonely novel reader entering into a ritual of anything" (855).² We can only overcome the textualist limitations of such approaches if we look at how communities use works of literature as elements in the symbolic processes that help to form them.

What happens when we are reading a work of literature? Until recently critics rarely devoted much thought to this question; like most other people who talk and write about books they have tended to take many things for granted that are by no means obvious (as the marketing director in any publishing house, for example, could tell them). Moreover, following up such a question would, as the first small steps in reader-response criticism have shown, lead into uncharted and unsafe territory. The situation today, however, both demands and facilitates moving in that

¹ Revised version of chapter 5 in Engler, 72-85. References to earlier chapters have been removed.

² This situation is quite different from that in the study of drama and the theatre, where there is a strong tradition of studying phenomena in terms of ritual (cp. Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Julian Beck, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Eugenio Barba).

direction. The cinema and the electronic media have become forces which—though by no means making the book obsolete—have displaced it as the paradigmatic means of cultural communication. This has created an awareness that the book is one medium among others, with its own characteristics, and specific rules that govern its use.

Discussion of these rules is difficult, because we have a tendency to privatize everything associated with obtaining and reading books. The lonely activity of reading—the interaction between a text and an individual—leads us to ignore the strong communal element involved in selecting and experiencing works of literature. Moreover, even the vocabulary we use when talking about literature is affected by a textualist notion of the literary work: We have a clear notion of where a work begins and ends, a notion defined by the arrangement of lines on paper. *To read* refers to what we are doing with the text when we have the open book before us; everything is excluded that precedes, surrounds and follows the act of reading, and contributes to shaping what the work of literature means to us. We have no words for the experience in its totality.

The process of what may be called, for lack of a better word, *enjoying* literature can be described as a cycle, consisting of three phases: Everything that precedes the opening of the book; everything involved in the actual process of reading; and everything that is consequent upon the reading. The individual cycles associated with each book grow enmeshed when the reading of one book becomes part of what precedes and shapes the experience of another.

The cycle can be described with the help of Turner's model of change, in terms of breach, liminality, and re-integration.³ We emerge from the experience of enjoying a work of literature as people who have, however slightly, been transformed. This experience may not always be overwhelming, but we all tend to be aware of books that

³ Theatrical events have been described in terms of gathering, performing, and dispersing, a sequence derived from Turner's model. Schechner's observation concerning the study of theatrical events is also valid with literature:

Too little study has been made of how people—both spectators and performers—approach and leave performances. How do specific audiences get to, and into, the performance space; how do they go from that space? (Schechner 169) Citavi

The crucial difference about using a book is that the initial stage does not consist in gathering with other people in a place set apart, but in isolating oneself from others—a point to which I shall return.

have been decisive in our biographies, not simply because of what their texts “contain,” but because of the way they affected us at a particular moment in our lives.⁴

For reasons that have been suggested we may be unaware of the social nature of this process; it becomes obvious as soon as we consider it in more detail. Before we hold a book in hand and open it to start reading, a large number of decisions have been made by and for us; certain conditions have to apply for the event of reading to come about.⁵ Expectations of a certain kind must have been raised.⁶ In terms of Sperber’s account of the symbol suggesting significance these expectations may be compared to the conceptual framework into which we try to fit the new input.

Some of these expectations concern the book as a medium. Thus, the prestige of a medium, as Schanze (54) has shown, usually reflects its early history, the way it established and organized itself. Printing, and, in particular, the book, broke the monopoly of clerics on the dissemination of knowledge, and became the medium of humanist emancipation; ever since the book has been associated with its early mission (Schanze 54). We therefore tend to expect a book, rightly or wrongly, to widen our horizons, or even to change our point of view—expectations we do not have to the same extent with a popular medium like television.⁷

In contrast to such liberating expectations, conservative expectations are created by the facts of production and distribution. In particular, we know that the book “got published and that most likely it was intended to be” (Pratt 116). This obvious fact has a number of often unnoticed

⁴ This process is discussed in terms of psychoanalysis by Alcorn and Bracher, in an article that significantly bears the subtitle “A New Direction for Reader-Response Theory.”

⁵ Useful preliminary remarks, with specific reference to contemporary fiction, are offered by Mary Louise Pratt, in her book *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, and they can be read in the light of the notions being sketched here.

⁶ These must not be confused with those included by Hans Robert Jauss in the *Erwartungshorizont*, the “horizon of expectations,” which are raised in the course of reading, and in Jauss’s practice only link the text being read with other literary texts.

⁷ Film is an interesting case in this context. Its prestige as a medium is still affected by its early association with popular fairs in Europe, and vaudeville in the United States. However, since the advent of TV, which displaced it as the main medium of popular entertainment, new forms of the cinema have developed (e.g., the “art film” in America, the “studio film” in Europe) which, as far as the audience’s expectations are concerned, share many traits with the book.

implications. For example, we take it for granted (unless otherwise stated) that authors have *written* their texts and thus been able to prepare them more carefully than if they had just been talking; that they considered their texts complete and without gross error when they offered them for publication.⁸ We also take it for granted that a text published has passed through a rigorous process of selection by specialists (readers, editors, publishers, and possibly authorities in the field) who have decided that it is worth printing.

The way we get to know about the existence of a book is a good illustration of the symbolic process described by Sperber; on the basis of data like the title or the name of the author we assign characteristics to it from our memories. In most cases we learn about a book from people whose tastes and interests we think are known to us: friends and colleagues, and also those who professionally ratify published material, those who have made themselves familiar with the book; critics and reviewers whose judgment we rely on and who write in magazines whose editorial policies we value; even the professors who set up college curricula (Pratt 117)..

In addition to these notions of the book, which we may consider to be general in contemporary Western culture, we also have to consider what we ourselves bring to the process of reading as members of specific communities: our experience as human beings of a certain age, male or female, living in a specific historical period, having specific linguistic, ethnic, social, and educational backgrounds. It does, for example, make a difference whether we approach Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as readers trained in the Bible or in the tradition of the novel.⁹ We often only realize the force of these qualities if we talk with somebody who does not share them with us, or if we re-read a book after many years and notice how the book has become different because we ourselves have changed.¹⁰

⁸ In other words, we take it for granted that the texts repeat what their authors had in mind. The phenomenon of representational repetition plays an important role even at such an early stage.

⁹ The experience of a friend of mine, who prefers reading biographies to reading novels, is instructive here: When reading a novel, the claim of some narrators to have access to the minds of the figures interferes with his enjoyment of the book. The authors of biographies explicitly state when they are speculating about the thoughts of a person.

¹⁰ In the case of re-reading a book, the situation is complicated by our first reading being part of our experience.

Our experience is further affected by the purpose with which we turn to the book; purpose in this case being defined by the community we have *chosen* to belong to in enjoying the book. It makes a difference whether we read Bunyan's book as students taking a course on the Early Novel, as students interested in the religious situation in seventeenth-century England, as people looking for spiritual guidance, or because we hope to be entertained.¹¹

Even before we have seen a copy of the book,¹² our expectations have already been shaped. Holding the volume in hand but still not reading it, we may realize that

the book itself as *object* symbolizes this selection and ratification procedure [...T]he book not only informs us that the text was pre-selected but also provides us with information about how and by whom it was selected—its credentials, in short. (Pratt 118)

The name of the author, the publisher, and often the series in which the volume appears may serve as credentials (and they usually appear outside of and at the front of the text); so can the size of the book, the fact that it is a hardback or a paperback, the appearance of the cover, the quality of the paper, the typeface, etc., not to mention blurbs. Often books—especially reprints of old works—contain introductions or afterwords by people distinguished in their fields, which, no matter whether we read them or no, indicate to us that the work has been considered worth serious thought by somebody important.

The complex process of selection and validation is a powerful conservative factor in cultural change. The persons and institutions whose services are publicly called upon to make us read a book are relatively powerful (as powerful as the conditions of a pluralistic society allow them to be) in wielding the public symbols of the community of which we consider ourselves to be part. In pronouncing judgment on a publication, they have to draw on the symbols that are accepted as valid by the community, and in doing so, they cannot but reaffirm them. In terms of the two types of ritual, rites of passage transforming community, and ceremony, reaffirming it, their work is therefore largely ceremonial.

¹¹ The notion of 'entertainment' deserves detailed historical investigation. Its modern meaning is first recorded in the early seventeenth century (*OED*).

¹² Many additional factors play a role in this process, which cannot be discussed here, e.g. the place where the book is available—the supermarket, the book club, or the university bookseller.

All these factors shape our experience and thus what we consider to be “the book,” even before we start reading.¹³ Turning to the second stage of the cycle mentioned earlier, to what we traditionally call “reading,” both the situation in which it takes place and its processual characteristics matter a great deal. Books—at least in the way we commonly read today—isolate readers socially and make them physically inactive. As Yeats put it in a memorable phrase: the reader “lays away his own handiwork and turns from his friend” (Yeats 207).

Yeats's words also draw our attention to another aspect of the reading situation: Except for people who only use books as sources or as tools in their work, there is a division between the period of working and what I have called “enjoyment.”¹⁴ The period of reading is a time apart;¹⁵ as in a rite of passage we are forced to withdraw from our everyday lives. Indeed, we often read in periods that are liminal in our lives: travelling between home and work, waiting to be admitted into somebody’s office, relaxing before going to sleep or on vacation, etc.

The actual process of reading as a social phenomenon, despite recent interest in reader-response, is an area that has largely remained uncharted by literary criticism. Reading may produce experiences that can be described in terms of liminality.

The situation is complicated by our often simplistic notions of the reading process. We tend to take it for granted (*Rezeptionsästhetik* and reader-response criticism most certainly do) that reading is both a continuous process and a steady advance through the text. This assumption is not borne out by our practice. We may pause in reading; we may skip some passages, read others twice, return to some again later, etc. We may even disregard the linear nature of texts altogether and study them as if they were spatial structures

¹³ It would be misguided to assume that, in the course of reading, the text can eventually cancel out all such “extraneous” influences: Otherwise, the reception of books would not change in the course of history.

¹⁴ Note Louise M. Rosenblatt’s useful distinction between *effere*nt and *aesthetic* reading (*The Reader* 22-47).

¹⁵ To what extent this division is a reflection of a general state of affairs, to what extent it is due to the history of print and reading in our culture (the simultaneous rise of printing and individual religious culture, finding expression in private prayer, for example), this is a question that need not concern us here.

without a beginning and an ending.¹⁶ No matter what we do, we can only explain our procedure if we take into account what has preceded our reading and the situation in which it takes place. To give just one example: We certainly follow patterns in beginning and ending reading sessions; yet we know hardly anything about them.¹⁷

The third stage in the cycle of enjoying a work of literature is even more difficult to describe and even more intriguing. When do we put down a book? The question of how we finish reading a book has never, to my knowledge, been studied in connection with literary works, and a general answer cannot be provided here either. The question is usually answered in terms so simplistic as to be embarrassing: We put down the book when we have “finished” it or when we find it boring or bad.¹⁸ We do not give any thought to that strangely satisfying yet sad feeling of disengagement completing the reading of a book.

Finally, what happens to a book after we have closed it? When talking about a book that we have read, we sometimes realize that it has undergone bizarre changes. We blame this on the weakness of our memories rather than ask ourselves why these and no other transformations have taken place. In reacting like this we may be avoiding difficult or embarrassing questions. At the same time, we make it impossible to study the double existence of works of literature which is so basic to the status of the classic.¹⁹

¹⁶ My study on *Reading and Listening* discusses this problem in some detail. It distinguishes and illustrates five types of reading (for verse in particular): skimming, pacing, halting, repeating, and study (45-52). Today I should hesitate to derive such a typology solely from textual characteristics.

Novels without paragraph or chapter breaks are hard to read. We seem to need them in organizing our reading experience.

¹⁷ Edgar Allan Poe is the only important critic, to my knowledge, who gave serious thought to this question; he even made it a cornerstone of his literary theory (cp. his essays “The Poetic Principle” and “The Philosophy of Composition”). Yet this aspect of his criticism has rarely been considered to be of relevance except in the discussion of the short story. Moreover, his notion of a reader who is totally controlled by the text is one that we find difficult to accept today.

¹⁸ There is also the problem of how and why authors are forgotten, how their works disappear from the canon.

¹⁹ A large number of factors affect our memories, some of which may belong in the province of individual psychology. Not all of them belong there, however. Sperber’s account of how symbols come into existence is of interest here. What remains in our memories may be described as an evocation on the basis of the situation in which we are again confronted with, say, the title of a book, and our memories of its experience.

The teaching of literature, especially in the university, offers a particularly interesting case of a reading situation. All those involved in teaching and being taught are readers of a specific kind of texts, and *reading*, good reading, is central to a literary education.

Teaching should *not* be viewed according to two metaphors, which, though common, are clearly inadequate: students' minds are neither plants to be fostered nor boxes to be filled. Rather, I shall propose, the process of teaching initiates students into a new community. The teaching ritual follows a curriculum, i.e., a predetermined path: The instructors cover ground that has been carefully selected, and with which they are familiar; they are guided by the canons of literature and criticism. In other words, they are officiating at what I have defined as a ceremony. The students, on the other hand, undergo a rite of passage. They are urged to accept certain symbols (authors, texts, Literature) as their own by various kinds of exercises. These symbols are supported by what appears to be a consensus among the instructors, whose authority is legitimized by the institution that employs them, and their standing in the profession; further, they have the power of sanctioning students (e.g., in giving grades).

The way in which the symbolic material is dealt with also shows ritual aspects, even though some of these features may also be explained differently. Students and instructors meet at fixed times during the week, during fixed periods in the course of the year. They engage in regular activities, like the presenting of reports and the writing of essays and exams. In general, there are probably few areas other than the university where the regularities of custom and ritual play so central a role: They suggest and reinforce continuity, they create loyalty to the institution, they mark transitions in status, etc.²⁰

Where formal university training is concluded with an exam, as at most Continental universities, the characteristics of a literary education that I have suggested are shown most dramatically. In an education viewed in terms of fostering a plant, exams have no place, in one viewed in terms of filling a box, they are merely a spot check that the box is full. Again, neither metaphor is satisfactory. Rather, exams should be viewed as initiation rites. They are preceded by long and elaborate preparations.

²⁰ Another area that comes to mind is that of political institutions.

Those to be initiated experience the period immediately before the exam as one of emotional stress, or personal crisis, and are often close to giving up, even close to self-destruction.

The American system of collecting credits, by contrast, is an extreme example of what is bound to happen to education in a more pluralist society. The pressure, educational as well as psychological, to which the student is subjected is spread thinly over a long period.²¹

In his seminal study *Einfache Formen* André Jolles showed the similarities between the literary form of the riddle and the examination, and the character of both as rites of passage. In both cases there is someone who knows the answer and someone who is forced either to give the correct reply or to fail, even to perish in the case of the riddle. By knowing the right answer the examinees can prove that they are on the same level as the examiners (or at a level determined by them). Those who set the riddle do not act on their own behalf but represent a type of knowledge and a community united by it. The examinees are not just answering somebody's queries; they want to be accepted into a community, and to have full access to its knowledge and its privileges. Their correct answers prove that they are ready for this; correct answers are pass-words, as it were, which give access to something concealed (André. Jolles 135).

The symbolic and ritual aspects of education are inconsistent with a view of education dominated by the objectivism of traditional natural science, which has long been so influential in the humanities. In spite of this, ritual behaviour has continued to exist and to flourish, perhaps just because it has been viewed as marginal, as a mere embellishment rather than at the core of the curriculum.

²¹ This does not necessarily mean that the pressure is lighter. On the contrary, spreading it out may make it possible to maintain it more consistently. — The imagery used is also instructive: *Exam*, derived from Latin *examen*, 'weighing' is replaced by the language of credit and money exchange. *Examen* in Latin means both 'swarm (of bees), group (of people, etc.)' and 'index of scales,' from which the meaning 'test' is derived; in an intriguing manner the word combines the meanings of a 'social aggregate' and of 'being tried'. Unfortunately, etymology does not link the two meanings as neatly as one might wish. The term *credits*, on the other hand, suggests that knowledge can be quantified, that it is a commodity to be exchanged against others.

The importance of community, symbol, and ritual becomes even clearer when we look at the other role academics are usually expected to play. They are not only instructors but also scholar-critics. In addressing students during their regular classes, they tend to express slightly different views in ways slightly different from when they are addressing fellow academics. This is in part a requirement of good teaching, the result of taking into account the more limited knowledge students bring to their courses.

As instructors and as scholar-critics, academics act as members of different communities; the university is both an institution of higher education, and a centre for research and criticism. Academics therefore have two sets of loyalties and purposes, one appropriate to each of the university's roles.

Highlighting contrasts, these two sets may be compared as follows. As “teaching officers” faculty must secure tradition by introducing students into the community for which they are acting as representatives. They therefore mainly deal with symbols that are accepted by that community. As scholar-critics faculty may need to question the unstated assumptions of tradition, and give symbolic force to phenomena that have not, hitherto, been ascribed any. In either case, their position affects the way they deal with those they address and with the material they discuss.

The community to which a scholar-critic belongs must not simply be identified with “the scholarly community” in general; rather such communities co-exist beside each other. The characteristics of these groups have been described in detail by Grant Webster, who applies Thomas S. Kuhn’s sociological model for describing the dynamics of scientific discovery to postwar American literary criticism; we can restrict ourselves to touching on points where his argument contributes to or is in conflict with ours.

Webster's sense of the goal-orientation of scholar-critic communities is narrow. He speaks of *charters* instead of Kuhn’s paradigms, to emphasize that it is authority, not theory, as in the natural sciences, that is crucial.

A charter [...] is a set of literary values which relies on a grant of intellectual authority, is embodied in a document, organizes a critical community, and is limited in time and function, with the corollary that society as a whole can support a variety of critical charters. (Webster 10)

Webster's notion of the charter is useful, but, like Stanley Fish's idea of the interpretive community, it is too rigidly oriented towards the establishment of meaning; this is indicated by his mention of values, even of a document containing the charter.

In fact, a community of scholar-critics may have an origin far removed from a charter or values. The community need not even be strictly professional. It will be associated with names and slogans either of its own making or applied to it by hostile outsiders—like Spenserians, Blakeans, Joyceans, and even Wakeans, or New Critics, Deconstructionists, to name but a few.²² Members of these communities have their own heroes and heroines, and their sacred texts. They declare their allegiances and solidarity in the acknowledgments preceding their books, in footnotes and bibliographical references. They organize their own regular, usually annual conferences and sections at large conventions, where they meet likeminded colleagues and may become personal friends. They celebrate anniversaries and centenaries; they may even have their own holiday (like the Joyceans' Bloomsday on 16th June). They read and publish in the same magazines (often founded by themselves) and try to ensure that refereeing for journals and publishing houses is assigned to people not hostile to their community. Members develop strong we-feelings and lose keen interest in what is going on in other communities; indeed, they may increasingly be ready to judge them on the basis of prejudice.

What Webster describes as a *result* of criticism governed by a charter, so-called normal criticism, is actually part of its core: "a new tradition, a set of classics the critic can read and reread and look upon as a standard of value for his literary judgment" (Webster 22). Webster's illustration, a review of the year's poetry for *The New Republic* (Nov. 29, 1975, 24) by Harold Bloom is instructive in this respect:

A critic like Hugh Kenner probably would find this year's significant volumes of verse to include books by George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky and the late Charles Olson. That would reflect a vision that saw Pound, Eliot, and Williams as the central American poets of this century. I myself prefer E.A. Robinson, Frost, Stevens, and Hart Crane, who seem to me the rightful inheritors of Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson and

²² Characteristically, the origins and the exact reasons of these usages are often unknown or have been forgotten; they may later be reconstructed.

therefore *my* choices among this year's books are sure to be affected by my own view of tradition. Doubtless, this is a limitation, but no critic is or can be free of such limitation (Webster 23).

As this quotation shows, critics belonging to a particular community tend to take the existence of a canon for granted; indeed, some critics, unlike Bloom, are not aware of it as a limitation. If this were not so, more ink would be spilled in justifying the importance of the works that are discussed in books and articles. *Interpretive commentary re-writes, i.e. repeats, literary texts in the form of "readings"* and links them with other texts, both literary and critical. Interpretation can therefore be characterized as a ceremonial act, centring on the symbol of the work of literature. The very fact of a work being singled out for discussion indicates that it is considered significant; discussion celebrates its significance and thus also reaffirms it. Discussion also reshapes significance, since the more attention we are ready to pay to a work of literature the more subtleties we will probably discover in it.²³ The process can become self-sustaining.

Readings offered to a community of scholar-critics seek to go beyond ceremonial repetition and to offer something new.²⁴ We expect them to be examples of what Turner calls a "breach"; to the extent that they make a breach and find support among members of the community they will lead to a crisis of the community. Today we tend to consider novelty an important ingredient of good criticism. This may be due to the general state of criticism at present, which in terms of Kuhn and Webster has to be characterized as one of crisis.

With communities of scholar-critics, as with other communities, the process of social change described by Turner either leads to schism or reintegration. In the case of schism a new community will be formed, accepting particular authors and works as significant, as symbols. Whether the symbols that unify the community are drawn

²³ As Stanley Fish remarks in "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One": It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of a poetic text (*Is There a Text . . .* 326).

²⁴ Yet, as Webster reminds us (23-24), this need not be so: Cleanth Brooks, for example, justly gained critical fame and influence by his gift for synthesis rather than his originality. See also below, on criticism as redressive action.

from literature, from criticism, or from somewhere else, is not crucial.

On the other hand, reintegration may be possible, if redressive action is successful. It may take the shape of readings that try to bring together two conflicting approaches by integrating them into one another, or by showing that conflict between them is insignificant in the light of a third position.

The most powerful form of redressive action, one often overlooked, is the introductory book or paper, destined for others in the same field. Authors of such publications must be able to write for an audience that may only be familiar with an orthodox position, the sources of which have long since been forgotten, and which, to the members of a community, has become "common sense." This approach to writing may be viewed as a purely didactic requirement; but in their writing the authors, inadvertently or no, serve as mediators: They have to take into account the irritability of both sides, and have to make sacrifices to both. Studies of this type tend to appear when the heat of conflict is gradually subsiding, not necessarily because the problems fought over have been solved, and they naturally accelerate the process.²⁵

²⁵ This process can be observed in literary theory, where there were a great number of books of this kind from the mid-1970's. Jonathan Culler's influential books and collections of essays are perhaps the most striking examples.

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