

Ritual and Text in the Renaissance

The subject of this essay is the changing status of a certain kind of sign, and the effects of this change on literary texts, during that period we have come to call the Renaissance.¹ The changing sign is the symbolic act employed in ceremonial and ritual performances.² The symbolic act, the sign performed on repeated, formal, communal occasions, still exists in our contemporary society in various guises, but it no longer plays the dominant central role it plays in virtually all the traditional and archaic societies known to us. It no longer plays the role it played through most of the history of western civilization. The very word "ritual" today has acquired a clinical meaning; psychotherapists refer to certain neurotic compulsive habits as "private rituals." We are divided from most of human history by the waning of the ceremonial sign, and it is that incipient, massive, slow, uneven, almost invisible process of waning that deserves our attention. To discuss this process adequately would require the labour of a lifetime, or better, of a school. The brief historical notes that follow are not intended to demonstrate a thesis, but simply to state it.

The discomfort or indifference elicited by ritual in many modern men and women can be contrasted to the decisive role it played during the Middle Ages. It would be wrong, of course, to sentimentalize or oversimplify this role. Medieval ritual was itself subject to transmutation and debate and doubtless intermittent indifference. Nonetheless, the fabric of each medieval life was woven out of symbolic occasions. Each lifetime was punctuated by innumerable ceremonial observances, just as the organization of each year depended on a ceremonial calendar. The repeated, symbolic, communal, formal, efficacious act not only focused and defined the life of the church but also the life of the court, the city, the guild, the confraternity, the law court, the university, the aristocratic house and manor, the rustic

- Kant, E. *Le Jugement esthétique*. F. Khodoss, éd. Paris: P.U.F., 1955.
- Kolher, P. "Contribution à une philosophie des genres," *Hélicon* 2 (1939): 142-53.
- Massignon, G., éd. *Contes corses*. Paris: Picard, 1984.
- Mathieu-Castellani, Gisèle. "La Notion de genre" et "Les Modes du discours lyrique au XVI^e siècle," *La notion de genre*. G. Demerson, éd. Genève: Slatkine, 1984. 17-34 et 129-48.
- . "Le Jeu de l'histoire et du discours dans *L'Heptaméron*," *Cahiers Froissard* 3 (automne 1978): 58-72.
- Meschonnic, H. *Pour la poétique*. Paris: Gallimard: 1970.
- Navarre, Marguerite de. *L'Heptaméron*. Paris: Garnier, 1960.
- Neuschäfer, H.J. *Boccaccio und der Beginn der Novelle*. München: Fink, 1969.
- Propp, V. *Morphologie du conte*. Paris: Seuil, 1970.
- Sébillot, Th. *Art Poétique Français*. F. Gaiffe, éd. Paris: E. Cornely, 1910.
- Sozzi, L. *La Nouvelle française de la Renaissance*. Torino: Giapichelli, 1975.
- Tynianov, J. "De l'évolution littéraire," T. Todorov, *Théorie de la littérature*. Paris: Seuil, 1965: 30-47.
- Tranouez, P. "L'Efficacité narrative," *Poétique* 41 (1980): 51-59.
- . "Un Récit révocatoire," *Littérature* 38 (1980): 27-42.
- Valéry, P. *Oeuvres* I. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.
- Viotor, K. "L'Histoire des genres littéraires," trad. J.P. Morel, *Poétique* 32 (Novembre 1977): 490-506.
- Zumthor, Paul. "Perspectives générales," *La Notion de genre*. G. Demerson, éd. Genève: Slatkin, 1984.

1 Sections of this essay have been taken from my "Ceremonial Play and Parody in the Renaissance."

2 Distinctions between "ceremony" and "ritual" are not easy to make, and my usages of these terms will overlap. In general, the distinction made by Victor Turner is useful: "Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory" (cf. Turner 95).

countryside. The individual knew who he or she was, found his/her place in time and society, through this fabric of symbolic occasions. It is not too much to speak of each medieval individual as endowed with a ceremonial identity.

In the acquisition of this identity, ecclesiastical liturgy had a primary function. When Peter Lombard in the twelfth century fixed the number of sacraments at seven, he codified the great over-arching punctuation marks in every Christian life. In the sacraments and lesser rituals was grounded the certainty of one's status as Christian. Keith Thomas remarks that "The Church was important to [a medieval peasant] not because of its formalized code of belief, but because its rites were an essential accompaniment to the important events of his own life.... Religion was a ritual method of living, not a set of dogmas" (76-77). One is only tempted to question whether this view was limited to the peasant. Jean Daniélou has written that during the patristic era "les sacraments apparaissent comme les événements essentiels de l'existence chrétienne et de l'existence tout court, comme le prolongement des grandes oeuvres de Dieu, dans l'Ancient Testament et dans le Nouveau" (26). Something of this prestige still remained during the high Middle Ages and indeed in many pockets of European society far later. Daniélou shows that the symbolism of the sacraments was saturated in the history and ceremonial of the Old Testament. This ceremonial, in turn, had its roots in the archaic, nomadic, pre-Mosaic era of Jewish history. From the rites of that archaic society to the rituals of the medieval church there is much transformation but no rupture. The basic elements of the sacraments — sacrifice, purification, commensality, initiation, death and resurrection, union with the divine — are basic elements of rituals throughout the world. The particular Christian symbolic action links the worshipper indirectly with an immemorial universal action.

This weight of shared experience takes on a special drama when the ritual act is placed radically in question, as it was most visibly and articulately during the sixteenth century. It is true that this *mise en question* had anticipations throughout western history. The sacraments alone had provoked plenty of debate over the centuries, arguably beginning with the New Testament itself. There do at least appear to be divergences among the sacramental conceptions of Matthew, John and Paul. The Scholastics debated the precise modality of the sacramental symbol's efficacy, the precise manner in which the sign instills grace. The Joachimite heresy of the thirteenth century was essentially anti-ritualist. The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards (1395) included the affirmation "that exorcisms and hallowings, made in the Church, of wine, bread, and wax, water, salt and oil and incense, the stone of the altar, upon vestments, mitre, cross, and pilgrims' staves, be the very practice of necromancy, rather than of the holy theology" (Thomas

51). During the fifteenth century, a questioning of the *centrality* of ritual emerges both in the Hussite movement and the *devotio moderna*; gestural symbolism now begins to appear as external, empty, inessential. To find this attitude in Savonarola is perhaps not surprising, but we also hear something like it at the opening of the sixteenth century from the general of the Dominicans, the distinguished theologian Cajetan, who wrote after the sack of Rome that prelates of the Roman church had decayed until they were good for nothing beyond outward ceremonials (Hughes 474). Egidio da Viterbo, prior general of the Augustinian order under popes Julius II and Leo X, wrote repeatedly that the eucharist, performed without proper love and devotion, was a "*vanum opus*" (O'Malley, *Giles* 119).³ This opinion was not of course heterodox, but its recurrence in Egidio's writing suggests a fear that the eucharist *had* become a mere formality. Thus the Roman sacraments were by no means untouched by ecclesiastical concern when the Reform called them into question. But it was the reformers who levelled most vigorously against sacraments and ceremonies the charge of externality and hollowness. With Luther, and earlier with Erasmus, we begin to find antitheses of inside and outside, an inner core of spiritual feeling contrasting with the outer pomp and magical hocus-pocus of the sign-in-itself. Erasmus, as Michael Sreech has demonstrated, believed in the spiritual power of the sacrament but expressed scorn for ecclesiastical "*ceremoniolae*," rendered by Sreech as "trivial little ritual nonsenses" (119). In Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, at least two sacraments are retained (baptism and eucharist), but the repeated, symbolic act performed by the priest yields its determinant importance to the original, unique promise of Christ, a verbal act which the two remaining sacraments perpetuate. It is worth noting however that neither Luther nor Calvin nor Hooker at the end of the century could quite bring themselves to deny unambiguously *any* efficacious power to the sacraments retained. Calvin's thought seems to waver slightly, far more subtle and complex than the sweeping rejections of Zwingli and other Swiss reformers. One can trace even in the greatest of the revolutionaries a reluctance to dismiss the performative, efficacious sign.

If one moves beyond the sacraments, one encounters the curious destiny of the word "ceremony" and its cognates both in Latin and the continental vernaculars during the Renaissance. We have already met its slighting

3 In another book, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*, O'Malley notes the lack of interest in sacramental worship traceable in Renaissance sermons delivered at the papal court. "There is no particular emphasis on the reception of the sacraments as constituting an important element in Christian piety. Although the Eucharist is from time to time eulogized, practically nothing is said by way of direct encouragement to receive or adore it.... Once again, what the preachers fail to speak about is almost as significant as the themes to which they generally recur" (167-68).

distortion in Erasmus. The historical dictionaries of the modern languages all record negative usages of this word beginning to appear for the first time a little before or after the turn of the sixteenth century. The *OED* gives the sub-definition for the word "ceremony": "a rite or observance regarded as merely formal or external; an empty form"; the first usage is dated 1533. In Italy there are analogous usages by Savonarola and Guicciardini, and in France by Commynes. In an ecclesiastical context, the term "ceremonies" came increasingly to designate the sensuous trappings of worship such as incense and vestments. In secular contexts, "ceremony" began to designate an excessive formality and overelaborate courtesy in social intercourse. Della Casa writes that he sees little difference between ceremonies, falsehoods, and dreams, when measured in terms of their insubstantiality (*vanità*) (579). Du Bellay, appalled by the decadence of the mid-century papal court, wrote: "Je n'y trouve ... qu'une cerimonie" (Sonnet 80). Montaigne, impatient with social formalities, wrote acidly: "Nous ne sommes que cerémonie" (II 17).⁴ Archbishop Cranmer, addressing Edward VI at his coronation in 1547, must have bewildered the boy by telling him that a king is God's anointed through divine election and that "the oil, if added, is but a ceremony" (Kantorowicz 318). Later John Donne would remark in a sermon "I have seen the state of Princes, and all that is but a ceremony, and I would be loath to put a Master of ceremonies to define ceremony, and tell me what it is" (382).⁵ Robert Burton dismisses gentle birth as "a meer flash, a ceremony, a toy, a thing of nought" (501).

Usages like these and others suggest that a kind of crisis confronted the communal, performative sign. They do not, of course, signal any decline in the frequency of ceremonies, however the word is defined, except in Protestant worship. Arguably, in statistical terms, the sixteenth century provided more ritual and ceremonial occasions than any other century. It is also certain that large sectors of the population in every country were untouched by any ambivalence. Among the folk, the great popular festivities of Carnival, Midsummer Night, Yuletide, among others, seem to have continued unaltered. The newly powerful, centralized monarchies of the sixteenth century learned how to use ceremonial occasions brilliantly in order to aggrandize their own prestige. The medieval solemnity of the royal entry into a city received a new éclat; chivalric contests like the tilt and the

4 Montaigne continues, "La cerémonie nous emporte, et laissons la substance des choses" (348).

5 One prince who professed a low opinion of ceremonies was James I, who wrote in his *Basilicon Doron*: "But learne wisely to discern betwixt points of salvation and indifferent things, betwixt substance and ceremonies" (49). James, to be sure, is speaking here in an ecclesiastical rather than political context.

joust were perpetuated; *mascarades*, *ballets de cours*, and court masques celebrated monarch and court with lavish splendor. But these brilliant fêtes heightened a manipulative element which had doubtless always been present. Despite their brilliance, we can no longer speak of the society of 1600 as we could in 1200 as a basically ceremonial society. In a growing sector of this society, we can no longer speak of ceremonial identity. During the religious wars in France, partisan mobs used ceremonial forms for their own brutal purposes, in what Natalie Davis has called "rites of violence." The traditional performative sign was called into question, and in the long run, as we in our own century can bear witness, it would enter a long decline. We may or may not regret the decline, but we are compelled to recognize in this slow, massive, uneven process a profound reversal in human techniques of signification. This shift may possibly have produced feelings of liberation, but it would be surprising if it did not also produce feelings of anxiety.

It would also be surprising if this shift did not affect the literary imagination. In fact of course it did, both directly and indirectly, and I want to turn now to a series of literary texts where the shifting status of the ritual or ceremonial sign is most clearly reflected. The choice of texts will necessarily be arbitrary and short. In some respects, as we shall see, literary history anticipated social and institutional history. We shall also see that with the decline of ceremonial force, writers felt freer to extemporize *ad hoc* ceremonies of their own.

A useful point of departure is the *Purgatorio* of Dante, surely the canticle of the *Commedia* which is most open to ritual action, from the symbolic girding of the pilgrim with the reed of humility in canto 1 to the magnificent and solemn procession of canto 29. A useful brief example can be found in the ninth canto, where Dante the pilgrim is permitted to enter Purgatory proper from the ante-Purgatory. Virgil and his companion come upon a small opening in the mountainside containing three steps, each of a different colour, topped by a gate guarded by an angel holding a sword and dressed in an ash-coloured garment. Dante throws himself before the angel's feet, strikes himself three times upon the breast, and formally requests that the gate be opened to him:

Divoto mi gittai a' santi piedi;
misericordia chiesi e ch'el m'aprisse,
ma tre volte nel petto pria mi diedi.
Sette *P* ne la fronte me descrisse
col puntón de la spada, e "Fa che lavi,
quando se' dentro, queste piaghe" disse. (IX 109-114)

The angel traces on the poet's forehead the letter *P* (for *peccato*) seven times, and tells him to wash away these wounds after he has entered. The

angel then turns two keys, one silver and one gold, instructs Dante not to look behind him once inside, and opens the gate with a mighty roar. As the gate closes, the poet hears confusedly the sound of a "Te Deum," traditionally sung when an individual takes holy orders, although first sung spontaneously, according to an old story, by saints Ambrose and Augustine when the latter was baptised (Singleton 194). Marked as he is by his seven P's, the pilgrim hears the hymn dimly; its words blur with the sound of the gate closing behind him. Only later, in the twelfth canto, as Dante is about to leave the first terrace, does he discover that he has lost one of the letters graven on his forehead, as he will lose the rest, one by one, ascending from terrace to terrace to the earthly paradise.

Jacques Le Goff has shown how gradually and how late the conception of Purgatory acquired firm outlines during the Middle Ages and how important a role Dante played in fleshing out this conception. The little scene at the gate of Purgatory was invented without prior authority, while harmonizing flawlessly with the doctrinal and liturgical elements already available. The three colours of the three steps correspond to the three stages of penance. The ashen colour of the angel's vestment represents humility. The gold and silver keys have their own allegorical meaning. The "Te Deum" as we have seen recalls the sacrament of holy orders. But what is most arresting is the engraving of the seven P's upon the pilgrim's forehead.

Singleton interprets these as symbols of sinful inclinations to be progressively removed as Dante climbs the mountain, his ascent corresponding to that satisfaction by works which is the third stage of penance. Whether or not this is the precise meaning, it is important to recognize, as few commentators have, that the engraving recalls but reverses a symbolic gesture in the sacrament of baptism. A climactic element in that ritual is the *sphragis*, the marking of the catechumen's forehead with the sign of the cross by the officiating priest. The *sphragis* was the invisible but indelible seal of Christ which marked the newly baptised Christian as a soldier in God's army. In antiquity a *sphragis* was a tattoo worn by a soldier or a slave to identify respectively his captain or his master, and in the slave's case the tattoo was placed on the forehead. A *sphragis* was also a brand marking sheep; it was probably the mark of Cain, placed on his forehead to protect him; it appears to refer to the *Tau* of Ezekiel 9 placed by God on the foreheads of those to be spared from the destruction of Jerusalem; in this case it should also refer to the saints of Apocalypse 7 marked with the

sign of the lamb (an episode which itself echoes Ezekiel),⁶ Dante the poet alludes to this Biblical and sacramental symbol but he also transforms it, from the T of the cross to the P of sin, from the indelible mark of Christian commitment to the delible symbol of sin overcome. Thus in this dense evocation of a rite of passage, Dante mingles elements from at least three sacraments — penance most visibly but also holy orders and baptism. He invents a syncretic ritual, heavy with allegorical symbolism, reweaving and reconceptualizing the millennial forms of the existing sacraments. His adaptation of the *sphragis* even leaves ritual open to a touch of humour when, in the twelfth canto, the pilgrim has to grope with his hand on his forehead to discover his loss of the first letter while Virgil smiles. The privileged role Dante will give in the *Paradiso* to the Florentine baptistery with its fount, the "fonte del mio battesimo" (9 8-9) — the site of his fantasized future laureation — underscores his own ceremonial identity. But his freedom in improvising a solemn, efficacious symbol suggests an open space for ritual invention toward the end of the Middle Ages in Italy. His invented ritual does not leave the impression, as subsequent analogues will, of an insecure grounding.

One other feature of this scene is worth noting, a feature that looks backward to the traditional sacraments and indeed to most ritual performance everywhere, but also anticipates the invented rituals we will encounter in Renaissance texts. This element might most properly be called "magic," if that term is understood to denote the use of signs, words, gestures, objects, and images to represent that which they attempt to bring into being. Magic for our purposes can be described as that art which uses representation to effect an end. By this very broad definition, a sacrament is magical because it depends on efficacious representation. According to the Council of Trent, it is "the symbol of a sacred thing, having the power of sanctifying" (*symbolum rei sacrae ... sanctificandi vim habens*). Thus the imposition and removal of the seven P's are also magical, as is the symbolic opening of the massive gate of Purgatory. Without the element of magic, the rite of passage could not properly be termed a ritual at all. One need only

6 Saint Jerome's commentary on *Ezekiel* 9 implicitly makes a connection with the *sphragis* of Christian baptism. "Volo noveritis quia huc usque apud Samaritanos tau littera similitudinem crucis habet, quamquam apud Hebraeos corrupta sit: ideoque per tau, quod interpretatur signa, intelliguntur illi qui signaculum crucis Christi in fronte et in corde ferunt, et per fidem passionis Christi, credunt se salvari posse." The phrase "in fronte" in this passage seems to point unmistakably to the *sphragis* of the sacrament of baptism. Jerome's commentary is quoted in an article by Sarolli, "Noterella Biblica sui sette P" (see note 1, 221-22). Sarolli remarks in this note that Dante would certainly have known Jerome's commentary. Sarolli does not however notice the allusion to baptism.

add that Dante's use of performative liturgical magic accords perfectly with that of the ecclesiastical tradition.

The space for ritual invention which opens more than once in the *Commedia* reopens in a less solemn context on the pages of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. When, at the opening of that book, the city of Florence is stricken with plague, its civic and ecclesiastical institutions break down. The number of the dead overwhelms the ceremonial disposition of their bodies and turns the funeral service into a mockery. It is after attendance at mass that the ten young men and women, gathered in Santa Maria Novella, decide to flee together to a villa outside the city. Once they have arrived, Dioneo, the most aggressive of the men, makes a speech in favour of self-indulgence and hedonist freedom. The leader of the women, Pampinea, responds by expressing her own hope for a pleasurable life together, moderated by reason, and to ensure the highest and most orderly pleasure, proposes that each member of the group take his or her turn as king or queen for a day. When this happens, another young woman runs to a nearby laurel tree, breaks off a few sprigs, fashions a garland, and places it upon the head of Pampinea, elected the first queen.

Queste parole sommamente piacquero e ad una voce lei per reina del primo giorno elessero: e Filomena, corsa prestamente ad uno alloro, per ciò che assai volte aveva udito ragionare di quanto onore le frondi di quello eran degne e quanto degno d'honore facevano chi n'era meritamente incoronato, di quello alcuni rami colti, ne le fece una ghirlanda onorevole e apparente; la quale, messale sopra la testa, fu poi mentre durò la lor compagnia manifesto segno a ciascuno altro della real signoria e maggioranza. (40-41)

This little improvised ceremony is interesting because, unlike many other historical and literary laureations, it has no precedent and thus no determinate meaning. There exists no precedent because the community itself has none. It will remain for the future, as the crown is passed from monarch to monarch, — it will remain for the contest of wills between the sexes and between individuals to define the precise power of the king or queen and thus the meaning of the laureation.

This instance of ceremonial play can be contrasted with an episode from an earlier, youthful work by Boccaccio, the prose romance *Filocolo*. In a section of that work, still essentially medieval, a group of young people recite the case histories of lovers and debate their rights and wrongs. But before debating these *questioni*, questions of lovers' conduct, a young woman, Fiammetta, is chosen as "queen," and a coronet of laurel is placed upon her pretty head. The queen thus becomes the arbitress in a court of love, a familiar institution both in medieval society and literature. The scene of *her* laureation is charming but not surprising, and her prerogatives are well-

defined by tradition. She becomes queen through a kind of ludic magic. Fiammetta's position is not open-ended; it lacks the improvisatory and experimental character of its counterpart in the *Decameron*. In the shift from the youthful work to the mature one, from one kind of play to another, we can observe Boccaccio entering that civilization we have come to call the Renaissance. In comparison with Dante's improvised ceremony, this one involves a greater degree of uncertainty; its meaning remains to be specified and the duration of its power is circumscribed ("mentre durò la lor compagnia"). The causal relation between gesture and effect is thin. The actual effect, that is to say the relative authority of king or queen, has to be worked out though communal interplay. The authority is not empty, since it includes the power to determine the theme of a given day's stories and thus the day's moral tone. Nonetheless this authority is never allowed to exceed certain limits. At the end, as we know, the *brigata* will not try to maintain its tenuous order beyond a certain point and will choose to return to the city. The greater degree of ceremonial freedom is matched by a greater degree of imprecision and fragility.

These changes are traceable in a large number of texts composed during the following two centuries, texts which in other respects have little in common. To glance briefly at a work by the third of the *tre corone*, Petrarch's *Secretum* displaces the Christian examination of conscience away from its traditional ecclesiastical context to a private conversation between the writer or his surrogate and his spiritual master Saint Augustine. The conversation has a makeshift ceremonial aspect, since it supposedly takes place in the presence of an allegorical figure, Veritas, who sits "as a silent judge" presiding over the discussion. But the presence of an allegorized Truth comes to appear ironic, since the *Secretum*, for all its brilliance of local insight, achieves no stable clarification or serenity, no final truth either for the reader or the tormented writer. It produces no efficacious symbolism, which is to say no magic. Analogously, a representative text of Florentine civic humanism, Leonardo Bruni's *Dialoghi ad Paulum Petrum*, stages a formal debate within the informal setting of a private house, a debate explicitly compared to the quintessential academic ceremony, the *disputatio*. The text thus calls attention to its deliberate ceremonial displacement. Despite the radical differences of Petrarch's and Bruni's works, they have as I read them one element in common: neither can be said to reach a definitive or unambiguous conclusion. The *Dialoghi* leaves readers wondering where the author, and his principal speaker Niccoli, really stand on the issues under debate, just as the *Secretum* leaves the human subject deeply divided by two voices. Each debate has been displaced and each fails to resolve effectively two opposing positions. One might argue that in these

cases the space for creative improvisation has permitted a blurred closure which seldom affects established ceremony.

An apparently firmer closure marks the *Convivium religiosum* of Erasmus, one of the most fully developed of the improvised rituals the Renaissance has left us. This gathering of cheerful and devout friends at a small villa to share dinner and scriptural reflection receives an explicit ritual interpretation from the host Eusebius. Anthropologists inform us that commensality, the sharing of a festive meal at a single board on a sacred occasion, is a familiar ceremonial symbol of communal harmony throughout the world. Eusebius alludes to the ecumenical character of commensality and underscores its particular meaning for the Christian:

Etenim si ethnicis quoque religiosa erat mensa, quanto magis oportet esse sacram Christianis, quibus habet imaginem quandam illius sacrosancti convivii, quod Dominus Iesus postremum egi cum suis discipulis. (Erasmus, *Cinq Banquets* 76)

Eusebius's word "convivii," applied to the last supper, echoes the title of Erasmus's colloquy. As though to underscore the occasion's ceremonial function, Eusebius proposes a ritual of purification. He invites his guests to wash their hands before dinner in order, he says, "that we may approach the table with hands and hearts both clean" (*Colloquies* 55) (ut puris manibus et animis ad mensam accedamus) (*Cinq Banquets* 76). Since any Christian meal is holy, the custom of washing the hands has grown up, he says, "in order that if perchance any hatred, envy or shamefulness dwell in one's mind, one may get rid of it before coming to eat" (*Colloquies* 55) (ut si quid odii, livoris aut turpitudinis alicui forsitan residet in animo, id eliciat antequam accedat ad cibum capiendum) (*Cinq Banquets* 76). The dinner's ritual function will further be dramatized by the chanting of a hymn at the beginning and the end. Thus Erasmus invites the reader to view the entire action of his colloquy, and most particularly the central scene at the table, as a kind of informal sacrament, a sacrament which will be open to humour, to pagan philosophy, and to the pleasures of the senses, but sanctified by the spirit of Christ. The self-consciousness of the author in thus recreating a sacramental community appears in the frequent repudiations of Jewish law, here assimilated to the hollow ceremonialism of church liturgy. Though one of the speakers refers to ecclesiastical ceremonies, he states that "there are ... other, more interior means of helping us to depart from this life with cheerfulness and Christian trust" (*Colloquies* 69) (... sunt alia quaedam

reconditiora, quae nobis hoc praestant, ut cum alacritate spiritus, ut cum Christiana fiducia migremus hinc) (*Cinq Banquets* 88).⁷

The means employed specifically at the feast is the communal interpretation of passages from Proverbs, 1 Corinthians, and Matthew, passages which elicit a range of interpretations offered with humble demurrals and amicable fraternity. Here in this sharing of complementary hermeneutic insight we seem to reach the high point of sacred communion, and we remember Erasmus's insistence in the "Paraclesis" that the profit derived from Christ's words by his readers is superior to the profit derived from his physical presence by his disciples. The improvised sacrament of the *Convivium religiosum* rests upon the propriety and nourishment of shared interpretation by laymen. Erasmus's confidence is moving but it is also ironic in the light of what we know of sixteenth century doctrinal history. The fraternal hermeneutic differences of this banquet would widen, grow embittered, produce bloodshed and chaos. They would scar the century as they were soon to scar Erasmus himself. Again, the grounding of the ritual improvisation emerges as precarious.

An anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, has contrasted the effects of ritual with the effects of language. "The distinctions of language," he writes, "cut the world into bits — into categories, classes, oppositions, and contrasts."

It is in the nature of language to search out all differences and to turn them into distinctions which then provide bases for boundaries and barriers. It is, on the other hand, in the nature of liturgical orders to unite, or reunite, the psychic, social, natural, and cosmic orders which language and the exigencies of life pull apart. (206)

Whether or not words always divide, as Rappaport would have it, they *did* divide in the sixteenth century, and the sacred word most of all. Erasmus's colloquy rests on the fragile hope that the scriptural word will induce ritual union.

In the *Purgatorio*, the *Decameron*, the *Convivium religiosum* — three radically different texts — one finds an element that may be common to all ritual, the acquisition of a privilege or a power. In these three cases, despite their disparity, the privilege is a right of entry, an entry quite literal in Dante's case, and in Boccaccio and Erasmus an entry into a community which is only slightly less literal. Petrarch's *Secretum* dramatizes a blocked entry or conversion. Not all rituals are rites of initiation or passage, but in every case, in and out of the literary text, one can ask what privilege or

7 This remark concludes a speech devoted to ceremonies by Chrysoglotus, who begins by deploring their dominance of most Christians' lives: "Si vulgus Christianorum spectes, nonne prora et puppis vitae illis in ceremoniis est?"

Qui ne sont point paresseux
De renouveler tes mysteres.... (V 75)

But the cult of Bacchus was also archaeological; it could only be revived, as at Arcueil, with a kind of self-conscious laughter, and the poem itself does not lack a certain faint self-mockery. The poetic procession and immolation translate youthful make-believe, humanist nostalgia, and hope for inspired poetic power. The mock-ceremony seems to have been needed to release the fury truly desired. Like the coronation of the *Filocolo*, Ronsard's Bacchic procession could be called ludic. But Ronsard's almost transparent irony is tinged with modern pathos; he knows at heart what he wants to deny, that the ceremony in itself can only briefly and tangentially generate the *furor poeticus*.

The texts that have been cited here suggest that the questioning of ceremony during the Renaissance left open a space for creative play with ceremonial symbols. This play could be exhilarating, but the improvised ceremonial symbols were shallowly and precariously grounded as Dante's were not. The Middle Ages had of course produced marvellous ceremonial parody, beginning with the Feast of Fools, and the sixteenth century would perpetuate medieval traditions in forms like the *soiie* and the *sermon joyeux*. But in the writers I have been discussing, after Dante, the power aimed at and the right of access desired cannot properly be called medieval. In these writers ceremonial forms are involved as means to a particular, early modern goal which the text itself defines. Dante wanted access to salvation, but the goal of an autonomous community in the *Decameron* is an altogether different motivation, as are the genial lay spirituality of the *Convivium religiosum*, the Rabelaisian brotherhood in freedom and Ronsard's creative participation in cosmic dynamism. The uncertain status of the ceremony partly masks a vestigial hope in ceremonial power. But the grounding of this power remains shallow because the ceremony is patched together, extemporized, *bricolé*.

The plays of Shakespeare are rich in experimentation with ceremonial symbolism and parody; their study might well occupy a volume. A few notes will have to suffice here. Perhaps the grimmest instance of parody is the scene in *3 Henry VI* (1.4), where the captured duke of York has a paper crown placed on his head by his Lancastrian enemies, who do mock-obedience to him before he is stabbed to death. This is a scene Shakespeare found in Holinshed, who pointed to the Christological parallel. Readers will also remember the mock-trial in the fourth act of *King Lear*, but I for one find equally disturbing the haunting description of Lear by Cordelia, "As mad as the ract sea singing aloud, / Crownd with ranke femiter and furrow weedes" (the *Quarto* text 18.2-3). That image flashes by so quickly in the

panorama of horror that we scarcely have occasion to reflect on the twisted symbolism of Lear's auto-coronation.

The uncertain status of a ceremony is nowhere more powerfully and self-consciously dramatized than in the tetralogy running from *Richard II* to *Henry V*. Here again the ceremony at issue is a coronation, which in theory accords the right of access to sovereign power. The treacherous, fatal ambiguity of the crown, the blurred meaning of a coronation, underlie the conflict of *Richard II*. King Richard falls through too blind a faith in symbols alone, through a kind of formalist heresy. He believes, or intermittently believes, that the anointment of his head makes him magically untouchable. At the moment of his fall, Richard improvises a public de-coronation, solemnly divesting himself of his royal regalia.

Now, marke me how I will undoe my selfe.
I give this heauey Weight from off my Head,
And this unweildie Scepter from my Hand,
The pride of Kingly sway from out my Heart,
With mine owne Teares I wash away my Balme,
With mine owne Hands I give away my Crowne, ...
All Pompe and Majestie I doe forswear. (13.4.1.2025-29, 2033)

Richard's improvisation briefly wins him control of the stage and frustrates the scenario devised by his enemies. It is performed in that space created by the displacement of a usurpation. His displaced status accords him the peculiar freedom together with the peculiar weight of this terrible, unbearable performance. His auto-divestiture might be said to dramatize the limits of ceremonial power, the breakdown of the continuity which a coronation is supposed to ensure.

Richard's antagonist Bolingbroke is trapped by the realist heresy, by the disjunctive assumption that a coronation in itself has no force and no meaning. It will require many years and insurrections before he acquires a kind of weary wisdom and recognizes the partial power of a symbol. In the closing hours of his life he will be shocked to discover his son, so to speak, trying the symbol on. Henry IV, broken by his underestimation of ritual continuities, pays for his mistake with a reign overshadowed by civic turbulence and inner guilt. The last king of the series, Henry V, lies awake on the eve of Agincourt soliloquizing on the burden of the royal role heavy with confining formality and symbolism.

And what have Kings, that Privates have not too,
Save Ceremonie, save generall Ceremonie?
And what art thou, thou Idoll Ceremonie?
What kind of God art thou?
What are thy Rents? what are thy Commings in?

O Ceremonie, shew me but thy worth. (17 4 1 2016-2019)

Where is the profit of all that ritual paraphernalia, now perceived as totally void of meaning and depleted of magical efficacy? One might single out that question as the dominant problem of the tetralogy. Henry V will never recover the reverence for the performed signifier felt by his grandfather John of Gaunt. Perhaps the real tragic protagonist of the history plays is the dim, noble, mutable presence of the ceremonial society.

Something of the same drama tinges Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, which reminds us that the ludic in literature can overlap on occasion with something very close to the tragic. The scene near the beginning of the novel which describes the hero's supposed investiture into the order of chivalry is a classic travesty of ceremonial faith. Don Quixote has stopped at a seedy provincial inn in the belief that it is a castle; he has greeted two prostitutes as great ladies and requested the innkeeper-castellan to dub him a knight after the requisite nocturnal vigil by his armour. He has placed his makeshift accoutrements by the innyard well and had dealt brutally with two mule drivers who approach it to water their drove. When this occurs, the nervous innkeeper decides to proceed immediately with the investiture and his improvisation does not lack resourcefulness.

Advertido y medroso desto el castellano, trujo luego un libro donde asentaba la paja y cebada que daba a los harrieros, y con un cabo de vela que la traía un muchacho, y con las dos ya dichas doncellas, se vino adonde don Quijote estaba, al cual mandó hincar de rodillas; y, leyendo en su manual — como que decía alguna devota oración —, en mitad de la leyenda alzó la mano y dióle sobre el cuello un buen golpe, y tras él, con su misma espada, un gentil espaldarazo, siempre murmurando entre dientes, como que rezaba. Hecho esto, mandó a una de aquellas damas que le cifese la espada, la cual lo hizo con mucha desenvoltura y discreción, porque no fue menester poco para no reventar de risa a cada punto de las ceremonias; pero las proezas que ya habían visto del novel caballero les tenía la risa a raya. Al ceñirle la espada dijo la buena señora: — Dios haga a vuestra merced muy venturoso caballero y le dé ventura en lides. (95-96)

The parodic implications of a scene such as this extend beyond the "madness" of its central figure and beyond the anachronism of a single rite. One might well make out in this scene an anticipation of the death of ceremonial symbolism. Yet the force of the scene and of the entire novel lies in the simultaneous recognition of a deep human need for this symbolism. For Cervantes's pitiless honesty shows the appeal of this chivalric ceremonial and the delight of its creative make-believe even as he shows the absurdity and the danger of its perpetuation. The prostitutes who serve as damsels are a little frightened but they are also vastly amused, as countless other characters throughout the novel will be amused when they participate in the

charade. By the end, Don Quixote is destroyed because all the others can play with his fiction only if he regards it seriously as a myth. By displacing as far as possible the form of investiture, however mangled, from its traditional context, Cervantes isolates and ridicules the potential equivocation of any ceremony. We are led first to see the absurdity of the serious investiture, then almost as soon the delight of its imitation. Only slowly do we realize that this travesty has been a trap. The novel first brings us to expect the facile demystification of a Boccaccio story, a reduction of a mystery to brutal "realism" and transparency. But in fact that process in *Don Quixote* is attended by a process of remystification. The new emergent mystery however is secularized, anti-institutional, and tragic; it centers on the compulsive human need for myths which will always prove vulnerable. The creative improvisation of the innkeeper, the prostitutes, and all the other subsequent characters who *play along* is ambiguous because it depends on a faith which is not playful and which exacts a progressively high price, in the end the price of life itself.

In the scene at the inn, Don Quixote wants the privilege of access to a social institution and mode of life represented as outmoded. Not all rites of passage were or are similarly outmoded. But perhaps one has the right to interpret Cervantes's irony as extending beyond the institution of chivalry, as extending even to the dream that a physical gesture, a stroke on the shoulder, could yield true access to a moral condition. The novel reveals itself as a tragedy of failed magic.

But I would prefer not to close on this note of failure, since the kind of literary play I have been tracing seems to me essentially fertile. The ceremonies improvised by Renaissance artists may have been precariously grounded but they constitute a resourceful response to the semiotic crisis of their era. Most of these writers, unlike Shakespeare as history-writer and unlike Cervantes, hold out a hope that the rigid repetitions of the past can flow into future inventive adaptations. One passage which leads us to be hopeful about that flow occurs at the close of Book I of Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, when, after the dragon is disposed of, the residents of the besieged city emerge to thank their saviours. Una is honoured by a row of comely virgins dancing toward her and playing timbrels as they dance. When they reach her, Spenser writes:

Then on her head they set a girland greene,
And crowned her twixt earnest and twixt game;
Who in her selfe-resemblance well beseene,
Did seeme such, as she was, a goodly maiden Queene. (1 12 8)

In the last phrase Spenser is glancing both at the royal sovereign of England and at the May Queen of folk festivity. But this particular coronation,

extending a right of entry, lies somewhere in the middle, "twixt earnest and twixt game," open to a nourishing past but appropriating it for new contexts. This space where the ludic meets the formal productively belongs to a lost semiotics, still saturated with formal performed signs but no longer, at all levels, presenting them as determinant.

The miniature history traced in this essay would need of course more quotations, more precise local analysis, more qualifications and counter-examples, before it could aspire to something like historical exemplarity. One purpose of the essay in fact is to dramatize the effective absence of a missing sub-discipline which the humanities grievously need — namely, historical semiotics. We possess many sketchy contributions like the foregoing paper which this future sub-discipline might incorporate, but to my knowledge we have no organized effort, no single scholarly journal, no academic program, which might focus the cross-disciplinary collaboration that is required. I have tried to suggest here a few of the consequences stemming from one tortuous, infinitely complex *mise-en-question* which a future team of scholars would have to explore. But the spasmodic waning of one immemorial practice of signification had of course further immeasurable consequences, and these in turn produced others. If literature remains a disorderly but autonomous system, and I believe that it does, future scholarship will nonetheless compel us increasingly to think of representation as a meta-system, and we will never exhaust either the problems or the enlightenment that development will introduce into our reflection upon the past.

Yale University

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. *Purgatorio*. Charles S. Singleton, ed. and trans. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*. Vittore Branca, ed. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1965.
- Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. F. Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith, eds. New York: Tudor, 1948.
- Cave, Terence. *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Cervantes de Saavedra, Miguel. *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Vicente Gaos, ed. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1987.
- Daniélou, Jean. *Bible et liturgie*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958.
- Davis, Natalie. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1975.
- della Casa, Giovanni and Baldassare Castiglione. *Opere*. G. Preziosi, ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 1937.

- Donne, John. "Sermon Preached at Lincoln's Inn," *Poetry and Prose*. Frank J. Warnke, ed. New York: Modern Library, 1967.
- Du Bellay, Joachim. *Les Regrets et autres oeuvres poétiques*. J. Jolliffe and M. Screech, eds. Geneva: Droz, 1966.
- . *The Colloquia of Erasmus*. Craig R. Thompson, trans. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965.
- Greene, Thomas M. "Ceremonial Play and Parody in the Renaissance," *Urban Life in the Renaissance*. Adele Seeff, ed. Delaware: U of Delaware P, 1989. 281-93.
- Hughes, Philip. *A History of the Church*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947.
- James I. *The Basilicon Doron of King James VI*. James Craigie, ed. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1944.
- Kantorowicz, Ernst H. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- Le Goff, Jacques. *La Naissance du purgatoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *Essais*. M. Rat, éd. 3 vols. Paris: Garnier, 1962.
- O'Malley, John W. *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*. Leyden: Brill, 1968.
- . *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court*. Durham: Duke UP, 1979.
- Rabelais, François. *Oeuvres complètes*. Pierre Jourda, éd. 2 vols. Paris: Garnier, 1962.
- Rappaport, Roy. *Ecology: Meaning and Religion*. Richmond: North Atlantic Books 1979.
- Ronsard, Pierre de. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paul Laumonier, éd. Paris: Nizet, 1968.
- Sarolli, Gian Roberto. "Noterella Biblica sui sette P," *Studi Danteschi* 34 (1957): 217-222.
- Screech, M.A. *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*. London: Duckworth, 1980.
- Shakespeare, William. *Henry V. The Complete Works: Original-Spelling Edition*. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Singleton, Charles S., ed. *Commentary. Purgatorio. Dante*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. J.C. Smith, ed. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1909.
- Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York: Scribner's, 1971.
- Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967.