

H-France Review Vol. 23 (October 2023), No. 176

Alain Viala, *L'Adhésion littéraire*. Montreuil: Le Temps des Cerises, 2022. 186 pp. Foreword and bibliography. €18.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2370712516.

Review by Van Kelly, University of Kansas.

As Paul Aron and Marine Roussillon, the presenters of this book, explain, *L'Adhésion littéraire* was the last, posthumous book of Alain Viala (1947-2021), “fils de paysan pauvre devenu professeur à l'Université d'Oxford” (p. 8), author of numerous works on the sociology of French literature including *Naissance de l'écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique*,^[1] *La Culture littéraire*,^[2] and *La Galanterie. Une mythologie française*.^[3] A focus on the socio-political contexts and the “enjeux de classe” (p. 10) in which literature is created, performed, published, and received characterizes Viala's approach to “la réalité concrète des usages au sein desquels naît et vit la littérature” (p. 11).

The key word in the book's title, “adhésion,” which “ne sera jamais définie abstraitement” (p. 11) per se as Aron and Roussillon indicate, nevertheless clearly designates the rhetorical and dialectical angle that Viala's theorization of literature takes, namely how literature creates the ground for acts of assent and adhesion--“concéder, accepter, accorder, consentir, agréer, aimer, adhérer” (p. 175), in Viala's own terms--to changing sets of values and media. The emphasis is on the interactions of author(s) and reader(s) at the moment of the work's creation, performance, and publication as well as over the long term, from one performance to the next, or from century to century, in a series of “communications différées” (p. 39). Over time, audiences and readerships change as does how they use a work of art for personal, social, or political profit. The concept of adherence or “adhésion” has, of course, a long history in rhetoric. Aristotle describes rhetoric as the technique of determining which psychological factors combined with which probable arguments, enthymemes and examples have the power to persuade an audience to act, judge, praise or blame.^[4] Modern rhetoricians Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca^[5] foreground the concept of “adhésion” or assent: “toute argumentation vise à l'adhésion des esprits,” striving to create a “communauté effective des esprits”. Perelman insists on the interactions of speaker and audience, ^[6] “the rhetorical perspective...puts adherence of the audience at the forefront.” Viala's version of the dynamic of speaker and audience resonates implicitly to these prior formulations of rhetoric as the crafting of adherence to a community of values, but his innovative sociological adaptation of this tradition to the study of literature's rhetoric of reader response is subtle and stimulating.

Viala builds his theory of “adhésion littéraire” via four case studies or “sites d'observation” (p. 18). The first site, devoted to literary “publics” (p. 18), focuses on Racine's successful and

unconventional tragedy *Bérénice* as performed in 1670 at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris, as well as the ensuing quarrel between contemporary critic Abbé de Villars in his *Critique de Bérénice* and Racine in his polemical preface to the play's first print edition. The second site or study, devoted to an author's way of building a pact with the reader, involves the opening pages of Marcel Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), the first published part of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The third observational site, devoted to how cultural agents (creators, performers, listeners, editors) mediate the reception of texts, delves into two *chansons de poilu* from World War I, "Chanson de Craonne" (1917) and "Chanson de Lorette" (1915) and their re-publications or reiterated performances after the war, but under markedly different conditions of reception. The final site, querying how literature and its reception change over time, analyzes quarrels among French intellectuals and scholars, some pessimistic about literature's future (Alain Finkielkraut, [7] Tzvetan Todorov, [8] William Marx [9]), others more optimistic (Antoine Compagnon, [10] Dominique Viart, [11] Johan Faerber, [12] Alexandre Gefen [13]). Viala's four sites underscore how literature and more broadly speaking "les discours d'art" (p. 39) create adherence, "effets d'adhésion" (p. 18) that assure their ongoing viability amid changing publics and audiences.

Foucault's idea of the randomness or aleatory character—"l'événement aléatoire" [14]—of literary texts and artistic works, once they are put into material circulation through performance and publication, governs an essential part of Viala's theory of adherence, namely the definition of the work of art as the conjuncture of, on the one hand, the author's attempts to anticipate the audience's reception of the work, and, on the other hand, the highly variable, real-life reactions and volatile dispositions that different audiences bring to their encounter with the work, immediately or in a distant future.

Viala describes this theory as a "rhétorique de la réception" (p. 119), which leads one to ask what an author is trying to persuade us to do. First and foremost, it is to invest time in attending a play, reading a novel, or listening to a song (p. 48). As Viala points out, this investment might be a few hours to attend a performance of *Bérénice* but is a considerably greater ask for Proust's *Recherche*. And since art and literature are not domains of constraint and necessity but spaces of choice, which "se situent dans l'espace du loisir" (p.41), an author proposes a voluntary pact attempting to bring his or her *gré* into harmony with the *gré* of the supposed, actual, or potential audience. This coordination of tastes or dispositions—an agreement "quand on lit, qu'on va au théâtre, au musée, au concert, etc." (p. 41)—is not a given, and the adherence of the audience (its assent to the author's offer) is dependent on the author's talent and ingenuity, but also on the encounter with the audience's tastes, cultural competencies, and prejudices. Author and audience have what Viala calls an "escompte" or estimation of what they expect from a work, what its "plus-value" (p. 174) will be. Racine is trying to impose his dominion against the competing play at the Palais-Royal, arch-rival Corneille's *Tite et Bérence*, whereas the Abbé de Villars counts on scuttling *Bérénice* as unworthy of the tragic genre because Racine's work affords pretty sentiments for its young tearful female theatregoers instead of sublime beauty. Literature and the arts are "laboratoires des pratiques d'adhésion" (p. 175) where authors' and artists' powers of persuasion are tested in an environment where the audience is free to assent to, or reject, the offer and social values that the works comport.

In analyzing *Bérénice*, Viala examines the play's content (the impending separation of Roman Emperor Titus from his foreign consort Berenice, Queen of Palestine) and the environment in which the audience received the play, in order to "envisager le point où l'œuvre et le public se rencontrent et où leurs grés s'agrément" (p. 45). The first point of encounter in this case was the

material theatre itself where young women spectators cried and young men tried to capture their attention, much to the Abbé de Villars's chagrin and Racine's triumph over thirty performances. The author must constantly adjust his works to the audience which he wishes to "plaire et toucher" (p. 28). Indeed, Villars's critique reveals that between the opening performance and the second one, at the demand of the actors, Racine suppressed the on-stage reading by Titus of Berenice's letter in Act V threatening suicide, in order to create greater affective adherence by the spectators to the tragedy's dénouement, where Titus also threatens suicide, though both protagonists finally resolve to separate, alive but with dignity, Berenice to return to Palestine, Titus remaining in power in Rome. In the printed version of the play, the letter is signaled in the didascalía as a prop but also silenced, a further illustration of the constant adaptation of authorial *gré* to readership's *escompte* or expectation. Different interests converge to define the work of art not in sublime isolation but in the "événement de sa perception" (p. 45) by a composite audience-hostile critic Villars, young women spectators crying, actors suggesting a change to the performance script, and Racine's later reading public.

In his rhetorical examination of the opening of Proust's *Combray*, Viala starts traditionally with a discussion of the book's first sentence, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure," but he treats the book's initial pages as the author's attempt to establish his pact with the reader, as he strives to "définir les conditions que le texte suppose pour être agréé". (p. 71). Proust's opening characterizes the reader as the narrator's confidant, introducing us in a series of subtle transitions into his private world as if in a "causerie amicale" (pp. 59-60). The narrator strives to establish conditions that will bring the author's affective and intellectual spheres, his own *alea*, into coordination with those of the readers, using humor (a time-travelling armchair, Eve's birth from Adam's rib) before broadening his assertions to include universals about involuntary memory and our ingrained perception of time, the central thrust of the *Recherche*. This socially-stratified initial "conversation entre gens cultivés" (p. 68) establishes an intimate zone of collaboration or "apogée de la connivence" (p. 65) which aims to coordinate the compasses of author and reader, their aleatory encounter, and bring them into a conversation of mutual consent.

The "Chanson de Craonne," a popular song contemporaneous with the battle of the Chemin des Dames and the 1917 mutinies, portrays the *poilus* or enlisted men as sacrificial victims while civilian slackers live the high life away from the battlefield. Similar words, tune, and thoughts animate the "Chanson de Lorette" and its variants. Viala focuses on the deferred reception and multiple types of assent that these songs received, from their singing in the trenches or during *repos* behind the lines, to their publication by German propaganda services to demonstrate French troops' demoralization, to the songs' re-publication in collections like *La Guerre des soldats* edited in 1919 by former combatants Raymond Lefebvre and Paul Vaillant-Couturier, socialist anti-militarists and future members of the postwar French Communist Party, and onward to centenary commemorations of World War I, when the audience's association with the soldiers could only be an empathetic "identification par projection" (p. 107). The songs' original oral transmission manifested the "potentiel de révolte" (p. 105) by enlisted men against the senseless slaughter, but the audience and the nature of its adherence changed distinctly once the songs were printed and reprinted for public consumption during the war and afterwards. To account for these shifts in reception, Viala proposes a fractal approach or "démarche fractale" (p. 138), a sociopoetics of what audiences, variable over time and in the means and degree of their adherence, do with literature.

In the book's last section, "Que fait-on dans les pratiques littéraires?," Viala returns to the "anxiétés déclinistes" (p. 168) about the death of literature which he underscores in his preamble as one of his reasons for writing *L'Adhésion littéraire*. Examining Antoine Compagnon's claim, made in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, that literature is an opening toward new ways of thinking and being, an "expérimentation des possibles" in Compagnon's words, [15] which the reader accomplishes at his or her own pace, in his or her own social and historical context, Viala focuses more sharply on the idea that what literature does changes across time and habitus. He concludes that much of critics' anxiety about literature's present state and endangered future derives from nostalgia for a more restrictive canon (whether a purist's classical canon, a Sartrian canon of leftist political commitment, or an extreme contemporary canon emphasizing experimental fiction). For Viala, literature is an exercise in creating adherence to changing sets of values, thus opening up the field to a variety of literary and social practices, which he calls "prismes textuels" (p. 167). He argues for the "multiplicité et vitalité des pratiques littéraires" today; "avec le littéraire on peut tout faire" (p. 168), whether politically right, left, or center. We might hear deferred echoes of the sempiternal objection, since Plato's *Gorgias*, against the pliability of rhetoric and rhetoricians, but this infinite adaptability is also literature's strength as medium, especially, as Viala argues, in the digital age, where possibilities of publishing, inventorying, and studying the *alea* of author, work, and audiences are multiplied exponentially. It is not a coincidence that the first four entries in the bibliography of *L'Adhésion littéraire* are websites of research collectives devoted to the study of literary quarrels and practices, which Viala discusses as examples of new forms of literary adhesion.

L'Adhésion littéraire is useful for its theoretical blending of sociological and textualist approaches which, as proof of its methodology's validity, produces ingenious and convincing readings of the rhetoric of literary reception of Racine's *Bérénice*, the first pages of Proust's *Recherche*, and the *poilus'* collective songs of symbolic revolt and protest. Viala situates these works in their contexts as "objets culturels, c'est-à-dire historiques et sociaux" (p. 138), while respecting their individual esthetic "singularité" (p. 138) or *gré*. One might quibble that Viala's comments on how this rhetoric of reception applies to the other arts beyond literature, theatre, and popular song are brief and suggestive rather than detailed, or, in a similar vein, that his remarks on Compagnon's critique of the seventh art, cinema, as one of rigid linearity constraining the freedom of the spectator to determine the pace and the order of his or her reception, are too short and schematic to be convincing (pp. 147-148). *L'Adhésion littéraire* is, nevertheless, particularly convincing in its insistence that literature is a form of dynamic and activist rhetoric, forging an enlarged social and historical "terrain" (p. 51) for potential acts of adhesion, now and in the future. Literature "va, vit, bouge" (p. 179), in part because of this rhetoric whose spring is *adhésion* or adherence to a creative community of values which does not remain constant but changes according to eras and actors.

NOTES

[1] *Naissance de l'écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985).

[2] *La Culture littéraire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009).

[3] *La Galanterie. Une mythologie française* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

-
- [4] Aristotle, *Rhétorique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960). Vol. 1, ed. Médéric Dufour, pp. 76-78, 1356 a-1356 b.
- [5] Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique* (Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1970), 3rd edition, pp. 18-19.
- [6] Chaïm Perelman, "The Rhetorical Point of View in Ethics: A Program," translated by D. Raymond Tourville, in Ray D. Dearin ed., *The New Rhetoric of Chaïm Perelman: Statement and Response* (Lanham, N.Y. and London: University Press of America, 1989), p. 103.
- [7] Alain Finkielkraut, *La Défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).
- [8] Tvetan Todorov, *La Littérature en péril* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007).
- [9] William Marx, *L'Adieu à la littérature* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2005).
- [10] Antoine Compagnon. *La Littérature pour quoi faire?* (Paris: Collège de France and Fayard, 2007).
- [11] Dominique Viart, "Histoire littéraire et littérature contemporaine", *Tangences*, 102 (2013): 113-130.
- [12] Johan Faerber, *L'Idée de littérature. De l'art pour l'art aux littératures d'intervention* (Paris: Corti, 2021).
- [13] Alexandre Gefen, *Après la littérature* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018).
- [14] Michel Foucault. *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 9, as cited by Viala.
- [15] Antoine Compagnon. *La Littérature pour quoi faire?* (Paris: Collège de France and Fayard, 2007), p. 31, as cited by Viala.

Van Kelly
University of Kansas
vkelly@ku.edu

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172