Chapter 9

THE TACIT LOGIC OF RITUAL EMBODIMENTS

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Abstract

Roy Rappaport’s attempted semiotic schematization of the logic of ritual, relying on analytical tools from C. S. Peirce’s philosophical semiotics, is examined in terms of both its conceptual coherence and its relation to other schematizations of ritual, especially Michael Polanyi’s thematization of a ‘tacit logic’ of meaning-making. The Peircean foregrounding of sign types (icons, indices, symbols) is compared to Polanyi’s delineation of an irreducible from-to structure of consciousness, rooted in the distinction between focal and subsidiary awareness, and to his further distinction between indication and symbolization as ways of relating to and effecting symbolic complexes, such as rituals. One of the startling upshots of this comparison is that the distinctions between ‘thick ritual’ and ‘thin ritual,’ and between art and ritual, become extremely labile. Examples from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Philip Larkin, and Simone Weil illustrate this last point.

Key words: Embodiment, iconicity, indexicality, meaning, Peirce, Polanyi, semiotic, sign, subsidiaries, symbolicity, tacit logic

Roy Rappaport, in his monumental and engrossing Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity (1999), lays an essentially Peircean or semiotic grid over the complex and historically variable phenomena of ritual in general and of religion in particular (see also Rappaport 1979). Coming to the materials from the philosophical side, without prior or contestable anthropological commitments, I find myself sympathetic to Rappaport’s concerns and admiring of his theoretical scope, empirical breadth, and existential engagement. But I am not quite satisfied in some ways either with his argument and its substantive claims or with the adequacy, focus, and implications of his conceptual framework. The philosophical
and semiotic core of his analysis, already adumbrated in his *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (1979), is a schematization of the levels and types of meaningfulness within which human beings construct and construe their lives in a world "devoid of intrinsic meaning but subject to physical law" (Rappaport 1999, 1). Within this stark polarity of the semiotic and the physical orders, which is actually not supported by Peirce's metaphysical vision, Rappaport develops the relevance of the classical Peircean triad of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity for the analysis of the practices of ritual, especially religious rituals. Ritual performances for Rappaport are semiotic frames for the production of meanings. They are intrinsically constituted as sign-complexes. Now the purpose of any sign, in the Peircean account, is to produce in the body-mind that is the interpreter an equivalent sign, which Peirce called the interpretant (which can be a feeling, an action, or a conceptual habit), and thus to bring the interpreter into the same relation to the sign's object that the sign itself has, albeit, in the interpreter's case, the relation is mediated by the sign-complex itself. Rituals, moreover, are to be situated within the systems of sign-complexes such as play and art, whose semiotic power and distinctive configurations—as Langer (1988) and Dissanayake (1988, 1992, 2000) have forcefully and convincingly argued—run parallel to or intersect with ritual's own, without being identical. Rituals, in Rappaport's view, supply or are access structures to meanings in their own way. They have their own logic and become the matrices of distinctive types of meaningful experiences exemplified paradigmatically by the bearing of religious rituals upon a realm of being marked by a pressing existential and metaphysical ultimacy, as in Tillich's and Jaspers's notions of 'limit situations.' It is Rappaport's concept of an embodied 'logic' of ritual, independent of representational content, that supplies the point of entry for my engagement with the theme of 'ritual in its own right.' If ritual is, in itself, a distinctive 'frame of sense,' how are we to frame, quite generally, independent of substantive commitments, this frame?

Rappaport characterizes *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* not as a theological treatise, nor as an investigation into the philosophy of religion, but as a "work in anthropology" whose "assumptions are, of course, exclusively naturalistic" (1999, 2). But while the empirical body of the book is, to be sure, anthropological, its skeletal structure, to mix metaphors, is a heady brew of semiotically oriented theological and philosophical reflections. Rappaport appropriates and applies the 'standard vanilla version' of the Peircean semiotic schema, which depends on differentiating the types of signs, or sign-functions, according to the ways that signs are related to their objects or make their objects known.

Peirce's by now familiar schema differentiates three fundamental and irreducible ways that the sign-object relation is constituted or ways in which a sign can do its work or function as a sign. A sign functions 'iconically' when it is bound to, and mediates access to, its objects by 'resemblance' or 'similarity.' The categorial ground of this type of sign, and of its meaning-making capacity, is a shared 'quality,' a particular 'suchness' or 'affective tone' immanent in both the sign and the object upon which it bears. A sign functions 'indexically' when it is bound to, and mediates access to, its objects by means of an existential bond or
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"real connection." The ground of this type of sign is an extended notion of 'contiguity' in space or time, including the time of the stream of consciousness with its structures of retention and pretention, of memory and anticipation, held in a moving present. A sign functions 'symbolically' when its relation to its object is defined by a convention, rule, or law. The ground here is an 'agreement,' whether explicit or merely followed in practice. These sign types open up, establish, preserve, and carry forward the great meaning-spaces in which we have our mental homes. They constitute the great vehicles of semiosis, the production and interpretation of signs, which are the defining features of our lives as human beings. As Rappaport rightly and provocatively puts it, "Humanity is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meanings it itself must invent. These meanings and understandings not only reflect or approximate an independently existing world but participate in its very construction" (1999, 8).

Rappaport, along with at least the bulk of the anthropological tradition with which I am familiar, thinks of ritual quite generally as a distinctive structure, that is, "a more or less enduring set of relations among a number of general but variable features" (1999, 3). 'Ritual' denotes "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (24). Although such a definition could also apply to a vast array of events, from voodoo ceremonies through political rallies and jury trials to state dinners or programmed private dinner parties, Rappaport, with deep intellectual curiosity and involvement, has considerably bigger fish to fry. He wants to argue the thesis that "religion's major conceptual and experiential constituents, the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine, and their integration into the Holy, are creations of ritual" (3). Rappaport goes further and calls these constituents "entailments of the form which constitutes ritual" (3). Ritual is a bipolar phenomenon: "As a form or structure it possesses certain logical properties, but its properties are not only logical. Inasmuch as performance is one of its general features, it possesses the properties of practice as well. In ritual, logic becomes enacted and embodied—is realized—in unique ways" (3). It is embodied clearly in the stream of acts and utterances, but also, Rappaport adds, in objects as well (22). I think, however, although Rappaport, strangely in light of the 'ecological turn' in his thought, does not make much of it, it is also embodied in places.

With the aid of a rather different set of conceptual tools, whose philosophical import I have developed at length elsewhere (see especially Innis 1977, 1994, 2002), I want to comment on Rappaport's handling of precisely this issue of an embodied logic and its philosophical grounding and validity. I leave any detailed discussion of Rappaport's material claims for ritual for another occasion.

A Semiotic Logic of Ritual Performances

The logic that Rappaport in fact is concerned with is first and foremost a semiotic logic. The central ideas are as follows. Ritual, as a matrix of meaning, generates
and carries two streams of meanings: the self-referential and the canonical. The self-referential stream is constituted by the experiential qualities that define the existential state of being (meaning-being) of the ritual participant. The canonical stream carries the articulate formal (interpretative) frame that informs—indeed, defines—the ‘point’ of the ritual, distinguishing, say, a Quaker meeting from a Buddhist meditation session. Or, to use another distinction employed by Rappaport, the self-referential dimension encompasses the nondiscursive, affective, experiential aspect of ritual, while the canonical dimension encompasses its discursive, articulate aspect. Looked at in this way, ritual performances are communication events, with no end outside of communication itself—a Deweyan consummatory act. Such a feature arises from the “formality and non-instrumentality characteristic of ritual” (Rappaport 1999, 51). Corresponding to the two meaning streams are two types of communication, although they are not strictly correlative: auto-communication and allo-communication (51). It is most important to recognize that even solitary acts of ritual, which are legion in religion especially, are intrinsically communicative. “In fact,” Rappaport writes, “the transmitters of ritual’s message are always among their most important receivers” (51). Ritual is not just a ‘statement,’ it is also a form of auto-affection. Participating in a ritual not only sends a message to one’s co-participants that one adheres to the canonical order that is being performed by the group; it also both formulates and sends a message to oneself about what one’s correlative existential states are, or at least should be, provided one authentically tries to realize them as defined by the canon. Auto-communication refers to the eliciting of experiential events and states, while allo-communication refers to a public manifestation of adherence to universal orders (53).

A key weight-bearing, and not altogether stable, hinge of Rappaport’s argument is the inversion of the normal hierarchy of meaningfulness attendant upon the choice of a particular system of signs. The inversion is as much a descriptive one as a normative one. In the Peircean schema, the ‘ascension’ of semiosis, which is logical rather than temporal, is from signs of firstness (iconic signs), through signs of secondness (indexical signs), to signs of thirdness (symbolic signs). As signs, however, in the Peircean frame, they are all instances of thirdness, since signs by definition entail, or are constituted by, mediation. While Peirce certainly thought that the vexatious rise of symbolicity, with its opening of vast fields of lying, deception, and possibilities, marked human mentation as such and that symbolic signs define the essential features of language as a self-reflexive and potentially infinite system of meaningfulness, he certainly never thought tout court that symbols or symbol systems were ‘higher’ in any absolute sense, nor indeed that they were or could be ‘lower.’ But this is what Rappaport suggests with his pivotal, fateful, and unjustified distinction between low-order, middle-order, and high-order levels of meaning, which should instead be correlated rather than ranked.

Low-order meanings he calls ‘taxonomic.’ Embodied in linguistic symbol systems, these meanings ‘cut’ or ‘articulate’ the continuum of experience into classes by marking differences, that is, by articulating and expressing forms of
definiteness or pertinence. The basis of this approach is conventionalized distinction, which makes up the discursive order. Middle-order meanings are, in Rappaport's schema, 'metaphorical,' based on similarity. These types of meanings are carried by systems of iconic signs, although the various media in which they are embodied are not of the same sort. Metaphorical meanings can be rooted in multiple sensory modalities and can be embedded in linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, and other systems. High-order meanings, for Rappaport, are wedded to the Peircean semiotic category of indexicality. They are defined by the goal of what Rappaport calls 'unification.' Indexical signs 'participate' in one way or the other in what they signify. They have a 'real connection' with their objects. The interpreter and user of such high-order signs is brought into an experienced real relation to their objects. This is an essentially 'unitive' form of meaning. The sign-user, by means of such a high-order sign, is 'affected' by the signified reality. Such distinctions, however, rather than being Peircean, are parasitic on Tillich's insightful differentiation between 'signs' and 'symbols' as exemplifications of 'mere pointing' and of 'constitutive participation.'

Rappaport draws a number of problematic consequences from this schematization. First, rituals are, he thinks, deeply dependent on indices (1999, 56), although they are not exclusively defined by them. Inasmuch as rituals strive for a 'conscious effect' on the participant, this effect, he claims, can be realized only if there is a real connection between the realities intended in (projected from) the ritual and the practitioner of the ritual. Rituals are both something we do and something that is done to us. In the loaded words of the Protestant theologian Tom Driver, rituals are "primarily instruments designed to change a situation. They are more like washing machines than books" (Driver 1998, 93). Secondly, Rappaport contends that the role of indices makes the boundary between the physical and the meaningful essentially vague. Ritual participation sets up bodily reverberations in the participants, inscribing a set of meanings into the psychophysical system of its performers. Thirdly, ritual meanings, to the degree that they are indexical, in the specific and actually non-Peircean sense Rappaport gives to this notion, are 'ineffable.' They are not said but 'displayed.' They belong, in Rappaport's account, to the realm of showing or to the 'presentational' side of ritual, to follow Langer's terminology, which Rappaport also adverts to (Rappaport 1999, 73), but whose import he does not bring into full consonance with his Peircean commitments. As Langer (1988) develops the notion, presentational forms, which 'show' rather than 'say,' are far removed from indexicality as semiotic mode. Nevertheless, Rappaport clearly sees that the deep finality of ritual is oriented towards a hierarchy of subjectivity and is governed by a logic of integration: self-integration, the pursuit of 'wholeness as holiness' (which leads him towards an ecological position), and integration into the realities projected by or constituted by the ritual. These realities, and their apprehension, escape, in the last analysis, the discursive dimension. When Rappaport claims that "certain meanings and effects can best, or even only, be expressed or achieved in ritual" (Rappaport 1999, 30), it is important to note
the parallel between the *expression* of meanings and the *achievement* of effects. Fourthly, ritual participation is both an existential and a categorial ‘predication.’ Ritual participation opens participants to definitions of their states. This definition takes two forms: (a) existential and experiential achievement of a defined state of being, and (b) the actual definition of the state of being within a categorial system. “By participating in a ritual the performer reaches out of his private self, so to speak, in a public canonical order to grasp the category that he then imposes on his private processes” (106). Self-predication is an act of existential interpretation, fusing, ideally, the self-referential and the canonical into one. While the “canonical guides, limits, and, indeed, defines, the self-referential” (106), it does not constitute the total reality of the ritual’s effects. “In all rituals private psychophysical processes and public orders are at once articulated to each other and buffered against each other” (105). ‘Articulation’ and ‘buffering’ express the dialectical tension between the ‘existential’ and the ‘canonical’ dimensions of ritual and the nonreducibility of one to the other. ‘Articulation’ is both a discursive and an experiential act or process.

In religious ritual, the lived senses of the Holy and their discursive formulation and development are articulated in what Rappaport calls Universal Sacred Postulates. The notion of self-articulation as self-predication allows Rappaport to advert to a central semiotic phenomenon: people are “predicated by the abstractions which they themselves realize” (1999, 149). Rappaport oscillates between the language of predication and the language of form and substance to describe this process. In ritual, he writes, we have the “substantiation of form and an informing of substance” (29). Rituals involve, on the one hand, substantiating the nonmaterial (141), that is, the system of articulate meanings constituting the canonical dimension, defined by the symbolic order, as in Halakhic observances, which “attempt to realize a divine order in mundane time” (209). On the other hand, the material is necessarily ‘formalized,’ embedded in an articulate frame as a ‘form of sense.’ By a ‘form of sense’ I mean, in the present context, first, an articulated form in which what Eugene Gendlin (1962) has called *felt meaning* is given, and, second, the system of categories that perform an operative hermeneutic function, that supply the content of the ritual, the interpretation of the ritual’s implied vision, and not merely the enactment of the vision. A Seder is not a High Mass. A Zen meditation session is not a Quaker meeting. A bar mitzvah is not a Christian confirmation. These essentially different activities are taxonomically, that is, canonically, different from one another. They also have different ‘feels’ or ‘affective tones.’

Rappaport’s analysis of ritual clearly oscillates between a bipolar model that distinguishes between (a) the performative (that is, experiential) and the canonical (that is, liturgical) sides of ritual, and (b) a triadic semiotic model that attempts to exploit the Peircean schema. The first distinction establishes the fact and necessity of embodiment relations. The second set of distinctions establishes not so much a hierarchy of meaningfulness as a polydimensionality of meaningfulness. But Rappaport does not really tell us how we are to think of the *mechanisms* of embodiment. And his foregrounding of the essentially
semiotic dimension of ritual by means of an appropriation of Peirce needs to be corrected and enriched by other conceptual frameworks.

The principal problem is twofold. First, Rappaport has not exploited the Peircean notion of the interpretant, with its differentiation by Peirce into the affective, the energetic, and the logical. Secondly, and connected with this, Rappaport has not adverted to the overarching primacy of an iconicity defined by a distinctive 'quality,' not indexicality, as the defining feature of the enframed existential effects of ritual. Unitive meanings cannot be irretrievably wedded to indexicality, whose defining marks include duality, resistance, sense of external effect. As I see it, the semiotic dimension in Rappaport stands in uneasy, or at least unclarified, relationship to the embodiment dimension. While it is, I think, true that the "numinous and the holy are ... rooted in the organic depths of human being" (Rappaport 1999, 230), we could ask how precisely these organic depths are affected and defined by ritual's canonical, and hence semiotic, side, which powerfully gives us "simultaneous representation of multiple significata" (256) whose import is articulated and grounded by the Universal Sacred Postulates and whose experienced simultaneity is grounded in an integration of incompatibles.

I would like now to illustrate how some elements from another philosophical project, which also oscillates between embodiment and meaning, intersect with and throw light on this admittedly limited set of issues that by no means exhaust the scope of Rappaport's analysis, but nevertheless bear upon its conceptual armature. They exemplify the complexity of any analysis of ritual that wants to be philosophically adequate to its object. More specifically, I want to show how Michael Polanyi's development of the notion of 'tacit knowing,' and the correlative model of consciousness on which it is built, perspicuously foregrounds key aspects of the 'tacit logic' of ritual embodiment. This topic, strangely enough, is treated with great acumen in Polanyi's 1958 masterwork, Personal Knowledge, the principal goal of which was a radical dismantling of the great myth of scientific objectivism with its own commitment to the fateful dichotomy of intrinsic meaning and physical law.

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The analogy of skills that lies at the heart of Polanyi's model is extraordinarily relevant to the analysis of ritual, initiation into which, or the learning of which, has the structure of a skill. Polanyi formulates his alternative idea of knowledge in the following manner.

I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill. Skilful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skilful achievement, whether practical or theoretical. We may then be said to become 'subsidarily aware' of these particulars within our 'focal awareness' of the coherent entity that we
achieve. Clues and tools are things used as such and not observed in themselves. They are made to function as extensions of our bodily equipment and this involves a certain change in our own being. Acts of comprehension are to this extent irreversible, and also non-critical. For we cannot possess any fixed framework within which the reshaping of our hitherto fixed framework could be critically tested. (Polanyi 1958, vii)

Rituals are comprehensive entities whose subsidiary particulars are an array of actions, utterances, objects, and places that function as vectors within the field of consciousness. The ritual is a complex concatenation of actional, linguistic, affective, and perceptual (objectual and spatial-local) wholes. The achievement of these wholes not only demands skillful knowledge but brings it into being and generates a specific type of experience, which we can fail to have. As Polanyi puts it in Personal Knowledge, “any deliberate existential use of the mind may be said to succeed or fail in achieving a desired experience” (Polanyi 1958, 201–202). The type of experience is intrinsically wedded to the subsidiary particulars that are indwelt. For as the American pragmatist John Dewey pointed out, relying on Peirce, each type of experience is marked by a distinctive qualitative feel. Each type of subsidiary, and the whole resulting from its integration, is regulated by “an underlying and pervasive quality” (Dewey 1931, 96). This underlying unity of qualitateness “regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation” (99). Running through all of the particulars, this quality “gives meaning to each and binds them together” (96). It is this quality that is first and foremost apprehended in the process of the tacit integration of a field of particulars into which we have extended ourselves. “Since tacit knowing establishes a meaningful relation between two terms, we identify it with the understanding of the comprehensive entity which these two terms jointly constitute. Thus, the proximal term represents the particulars of this entity, and we can say, accordingly, that we comprehend the entity by relying on our awareness of its particulars for attending to their joint meaning” (Polanyi 1966, 13). Or, as Polanyi puts it, “we dwell in all subsidiarily experienced things” (1969, 183). It is the joint meanings arising in ritual integrations that are at issue.

Polanyi, in fact, has strikingly analyzed ritual in light of these concepts. Ritual theorists with philosophical concerns should take notice. Ritual is connected by Polanyi with a specific take on the twin notions of contemplation and participation, corresponding to the canonical and the performative roles that Rappaport delineates. Polanyi uses a version of Christianity as a paradigmatic instance of a general principle, much as Rappaport scoured the vast anthropological data field for his instances. “The universe of every great articulate system is constructed by elaborating and transmuting one particular aspect of anterior experience: the Christian faith elaborates and renders effective the supernatural aspect of anterior experience in terms of its own internal experience” (Polanyi 1958, 283).
evocation and imposition (self-predication) of a set of correct modes of feeling that are enjoyed for their own sake, as an inherent quality of experience, with "no ulterior intention or ulterior meaning" (197). The purpose of ritual, in the Polanyian position, is to provide a field of actions, gestures, words, images, or places that elicit these modes of feeling. But this field is itself purposely generated and formalized by a passionate quest to break out of the normal conceptual framework within which we interpret and experience the world. Indeed, the religious ritual displays a permanent tension between dwelling in and breaking out, which also grounds the sense of the numinous.

Polanyi remarks that "a valid articulate framework may be a theory, or a mathematical discovery, or a symphony. Whichever it is, it will be used by dwelling in it, and this indwelling can be consciously experienced" (1958, 195). Ritual has indeed a deep affinity with the performance of a symphony. When we observe or manipulate experience, however, "we are guided by experience and pass through experience without experiencing it in itself" (197). The conceptual framework in such cases functions as a screen between us and the experienced realities projected by it. The performative contemplation "dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience and pours us straight into experience; we cease to handle things and become immersed in them ... As we lose ourselves in contemplation, we take on an impersonal life in the objects of our contemplation" (197). Polanyi continues, in a vein close to Rappaport and to Gadamer's analysis of art:

Correspondingly, the impersonality of intense contemplation consists in a complete participation of the person in that which he contemplates and not in his complete detachment from it, as would be the case in an ideally objective observation. Since the impersonality of contemplation is a self-abandonment, it can be described either as egocentric or as selfless, depending on whether one refers to the contemplator's visionary act or to the submergence of his person. (197)

It is egocentric in that the visionary act is an experienced state of being that is communicated to and made known to the participant. It is selfless in that the ritual contemplator submits him- or herself to, or lets him- or herself be informed by, transpersonal orders of symbolic meaning.

Religious ritual clearly involves at least the attempt to "break through the screen of objectivity and draw upon our preconceptual capacities of contemplative vision" (Polanyi 1958, 199). By "preconceptual capacities," Polanyi is drawing attention here to a nonanalytical orientation towards the world as a whole, or at least towards a segment of it, as a numinous phenomenon. In the case of Christian ritual, with which he was most concerned, Polanyi notes: "[T]he whole framework of intelligent understanding, by which he [the worshipper] normally appraises his impressions, sinks into abeyance and uncovers a world experienced uncomprehendingly as a divine miracle" (197). For Polanyi, then, ritual, worship, and contemplation are isomorphic and, in the case of Christianity and other monotheistic traditions, are deeply informed for him by the via
negativa. We are invited “through a succession of ‘detachments,’ to seek in absolute ignorance union with Him who is beyond all being and knowledge. We see things then not focally, but as part of a cosmos, features of God” (198). The search for an experienced unity is connected with a ‘mystical view,’ which transforms our customary modes of vision.

The meaning arrived at is a kind of physiognomic or physiognostic meaning, a meaning that is immanent in the form and, at the same time, a transcendent focus that is not able to be attained conceptually. Polanyi makes a crucial distinction in his theory of knowledge that is very helpful in determining just what kinds of meanings make up the ritual frame, and that intersects directly with Rappaport’s dichotomy of the performative and the canonical. Polanyi writes that “anything that functions effectively within an accredited context has meaning in that context and ... any such context will itself be appreciated as meaningful” (1958, 58). He continues:

We may describe the kind of meaning which a context possesses in itself as existential, to distinguish it especially from denotative or, more generally, representational meaning. In this sense pure mathematics has an existential meaning, while a mathematical theory in physics has a denotative meaning. The meaning of music is mainly existential, that of a portrait more or less representative, and so on. All kinds of order, whether contrived or natural, have existential meaning; but contrived order usually also conveys a message. (58)

Looked at this way, ritual and contemplation are suspended between these two poles of meaning. But it is clear that existential meaning, as Polanyi uses the term, is connected with the high-order meanings of ritual participation foregrounded by Rappaport. In terms of our analysis, we may say that the primary purpose of the ritual is to generate in the participant primarily perceptual and affective wholes by eliciting the integration of sets of subsidiarily attended from words, gestures, actions, images, and spaces or places into a focus that is the existential meaning of the religious experience. The religious experience, as the construction of an experienced whole, is configured as an existential meaning, embodied in an ordered frame. Ritual, or the total objective context of religious action or perception, can then be evaluated either from the point of view of its effectiveness or from the point of view of what terminal feelings or affects or patterns of sensibility are to be produced.

Polanyi illustrates the types of terminal feelings in his interpretation of Christianity as follows. (Other articulate systems, of course, will have different terminal feelings.) Christianity, he remarks, is characterized by a mounting tension along with the “hope of a merciful visitation from above,” indeed, of a gift of grace (1958, 198), of an experienced ‘gratuity.’ Consequently, “the ritual of worship is expressly designed to induce and sustain this state of anguish, surrender and hope” (198). Christianity is for Polanyi a “heuristic vision which is accepted for the sake of its unresolvable tension ... The indwelling of the Christian worshipper is therefore a continued attempt at breaking out, at casting off
the condition of man, even while humbly acknowledging its inescapability” (198). This indwelling involves a technique that supplies a demand to evoke appropriate affective states. The affectivity and sensibility that constitute the mode of response are generated by an articulate framework—that of ritual. The ritual functions as a subsidiary: its focal unity—the set of immanently experienced affective responses and transformed perceptual and imaginal physiognomies—must be generated by tacit acts of integration, by performances that cross a logical gap separating the field of subsidiaries from their organizing and binding context. It is in this deepest sense, rather different from that indicated by Rappaport, that ritual is performance. It is a performance of self-meaning.

But, how do we know that our ritual performance is correct and has generated the proper existential states? To what extent can we determine that we are actually having veridical experiences, as in the experience of conversion, transformation, and identification induced by ritual participation? Polanyi makes in this context a fruitful distinction between verification and validation.

The acceptance of different kinds of articulate systems as mental dwelling places is arrived at by a process of gradual appreciation, and all these acceptances depend to some extent on the content of relevant experiences; but the bearing of natural science on facts of experience is much more specific than that of mathematics, religion or the various arts. It is justifiable, therefore, to speak of the verification of science by experience in a sense which would not apply to other articulate systems. The process by which other systems than science are tested and finally accepted may be called, by contrast, validation.

Our personal participation is in general greater in a validation than in a verification. The emotional coefficient of assertion is intensified as we pass from the sciences to the neighboring domains of thought. But both verification and validation are everywhere an acknowledgement of a commitment: they claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker. As distinct from both of these, subjective experiences can only be said to be authentic, and authenticity does not involve a commitment in the sense in which both verification and validation do. (1958, 202)

Rituals clearly, in this view, are tested by processes of validation, by a heightening of the “emotional coefficient” of assertion. Nevertheless, relying on a theory and relying on a ritual have the same logical structure. Both involve a process of interiorizing. “To rely on a theory for understanding nature is to interiorize it. For we are attending from the theory to the things seen in its light, and are aware of the theory, while using it, in terms of the spectacle that it serves to explain” (Polanyi 1966, 17). The interiorization of a ritual, like the assimilation and practice of the processes of science, is a process of tacit groping, albeit existential groping.

Can we, however, specify in more detail the nature of the ritual participant’s integration of subsidiaries? Polanyi proposes a crucial distinction between two types of tacit integrations and consequently between two different forms of meaning-making, which he calls indication and symbolization.
The paradigm case of an indication is the integration of a phonic image to its meaning or sense, or the use of a word to denote something in the world. The phonic image is a functional clue or vector, but it has no intrinsic interest in itself. Although it has what Don Ihde has called an ‘echo effect’ or what Dewey, extending Peirce, describes as a distinctive ‘qualitative feel,’ it is still marked by an essential transparency, a purely functional relation to what it means. Any probe, pointer, or script is related to its ‘focus’ in this manner. Polanyi holds that “[i]n cases of indication, the subsidiaries are functionally of no intrinsic interest” (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 70). Such an integration of subsidiaries into a focus is called by Polanyi self-centered because the subsidiaries are “made from the self as a center (which includes all the subsidiary clues in which we dwell) to the object of our focal attention” (71). It is clear that ‘indication,’ as understood by Polanyi, is quite different from the way Rappaport approaches the notion.

But, in ‘symbolization,’ as Polanyi uses the concept, “the subsidiary clues do not function ... merely as indicators pointing our way to something else. In this second kind of meaning it is the subsidiary clues that are of intrinsic interest to us, and they enter into meaning in such a way that we are carried away by these meanings” (1975, 71). What are these subsidiaries and what is their importance in the analysis of the tacit logic of our embodied apprehension of the ritual as a symbolic complex, in Polanyi's sense?

This is what happens in ritual embodiment. A ritual, looked at as an embodiment of meaning, has the same structure as a work of art, that is, as a ‘symbolic artifact.’ It consists of a frame and a content that mutually define one another. The frame and the discursive content, following Polanyi’s analysis, embody each other, rather than merely bearing on the other or externally pointing to the other. What Polanyi says about poems, paintings, sculptures, and plays applies also to ritual: they are “so many closed packages of clues, portable and lasting” (87). We give ourselves to them because in the deepest existential sense we find ourselves embodied in them.

Rappaport makes much of the metaphorical dimension of ritual, although he inaccurately places it as a middle-order meaning. It is, rather, primary and constitutive. But, once again, what Polanyi says about the metaphorical structure of the artistic image can be transposed into the ritual key. The essential point is the irreducibility of metaphor and its heuristic power. Polanyi writes: “When
a symbol embodying a significant matter has a significance of its own and this is akin to the matter that it embodies, the result is a metaphor” (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 40). This is in fact a reformulation, in Polanyian terms, of both Peirce’s affirmation of the iconic foundation of metaphor and Langer’s notion of a presentational symbol that is rooted in the pregnancy of a form. Polanyi’s use of “akin” is a recognition of our grasp of (and our being grasped by) an ‘affinity’ between the symbolic form and its content. This affinity is more felt or lived through than thought. But it is, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) have clearly and persistently shown, deeply embedded in body-based image-schemata, which are subsidiaries that we attend from both in terms of our own felt sense of bodily movement and feeling tones and also in terms of their semiotic embodiment in the ritual. Symbolic image and metaphor are correlated with one another for Polanyi. They both involve processes of ‘figuration.’ Note how Polanyi applies his cognitional schema to this correlation: “As in the symbol, so in the metaphor: the subsidiary clues—consisting of all those inchoate experiences in our lives that are related to the two parts of a metaphor—are integrated into the meaning of a tenor and vehicle as they are related to each other in a focal object (a metaphor). The result is that a metaphor, like a symbol, carries us away, embodies us in itself, and moves us deeply as we surrender ourselves to it” (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 78-79). It is in this process of being moved deeply by felt symbolic affinities that I think we find the roots of the sense of the numinous and of the possibility of an interconnected whole that grounds Rappaport’s ecological notion of the Holy. For Polanyi, a ritual, like a work of art, produces, in multiple sensory modalities, “a powerful and moving image, embodying our own diffuse experiences, thus giving us an object in which to see them as integrated” (Polanyi and Prosch 1975, 79). But ritual images gesture towards a ‘transnatural’ fact that constitutes the symbolic order in the widest sense of that term.

The ritual brings us into focus through this embodiment process. Without the ritual frame and our embodiment in it, our lives would be formless, “submerged in a hundred cross-currents.” The arts are described by Polanyi in language that would certainly fit ritual. Just like the arts, rituals are “imaginative representations, hewn into artificial patterns; and these patterns, when jointly integrated with an important content, produce a meaning of distinctive quality” (1975, 101). This joint integration is, indeed, an integration of incompatibles on the literal level, but its fittingness, or aptness, is validated by the ritual participant who is simultaneously perceiver and performer. Do we not have here the specification of the epistemological background conditions of the inextricable fusion of ritual meaning with its frame? But strangely enough, this is not a fusion unique to ritual. It is a kind of general semiotic condition that marks all meaningful intercourse with the world that is itself always marked by a distinctive qualitative feel. This is one of the major insights of the whole pragmatist tradition, especially developed by Peirce and Dewey. Rituals, like works of art, are not just instruments for clarifying our life, in a conceptual sense, by imposing a set of canonical meanings on it; rather, they move us, as art does, “through influencing the lived quality of our very existence” (109). One learns to be so by being
in a ritual. The point of the rite, what it exemplifies, in Nelson Goodman’s sense, must be not only intellectually acknowledged but also experientially validated—that is, ‘known’ in both ways. Unlike music, however, which we can meaningfully experience without ‘knowing the score,’ every ritual performance, as Israel Scheffler puts it, “functions as a demonstration, or teaching act, a purpose of which is to educate the community in the rite’s rationale” (Scheffler 1997; 160).

This education, to speak Jamesian language, does not just give us ‘knowledge about,’ but ‘knowledge by’ acquaintance, participatory knowledge that fuses our consciousness, in all its dimensions (somatic-motoric, perceptual, imaginative, conceptual, aesthetic), with the exemplified and expressed properties of the rite. The rite, in fact, refers up to a vast sea of affects or affective tones that are exemplified (symbolized, Polanyi would say) in it. As Scheffler, following Goodman, uses the term, “expression is not a matter of what the symbol denotes or characterizes, but of what denotes or characterizes it” (Scheffler 1997, 140). Exemplification is therefore of forms of consciousness that are embodied in the ritual frame. We read ourselves into and out of the frame, just as we read the world through and by means of the frame. But this ‘reading’ is both a conceptual and an experiential process. The ritual ‘articulates’ or ‘selects from’ the dense set of possible experiential states and conceptual unities that make up for us ‘the world.’ We have to rely skillfully on the symbol to identify ourselves, for we are in it as much as it is in us. What Goodman says, writing in Languages of Art about the art symbol, can apply also to the ritual symbol in the broadest sense of that term, that is, any symbolic form or artifact ritually appropriated: “What we read from and learn through a symbol varies with what we bring to it. Not only do we discover the world through our symbols but we understand and reappraise our symbols progressively in the light of growing experience” (Goodman 1976, 260).

What is crucial is the semiotic density of the ritualistic matrix, its richness, its semantic or symbolic plenitude, its ability to shape and sustain forms of attending. This is also why there is a deep affinity between ritual, and ritual-induced modes of attending, and art in all of its forms. A deep and disturbing remark of Schleiermacher points in this direction. “Religion and art,” he writes, “stand beside each other like two friendly souls whose inner relationship, if they suspect it, is still unknown to them” (cited in Deutsch 1996, 89).

**Between Thick and Thin Ritual**

We can, then, see the bearing of the preceding conceptual schemata on the following examples, which would perhaps not otherwise easily come to mind as paradigmatic rituals.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his essay “Self-Reliance”: “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how chaste the persons look, begirt each one with a precinct or sanctuary! So let us always sit” (Emerson 1992, 145). What does one do in this ‘sitting’? One prays. And what is prayer in this Emersonian perception? “Prayer is
the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view” (147). The silent church, an objective symbolic artifact, looked at in this way is the physical and imaginative frame of the inner scene of ritual. I see no reason to exclude such an Emersonian preference, executed in the affectively charged and contemplative imagination, from authentic religious ritual. Certainly, Emerson’s commitment to a specific set of Ultimate Sacred Postulates, upon which he meditates while sitting and which he is trying to inscribe into his life, validates it. This sitting is a performance, an existential achievement.

Moreover, the poet Philip Larkin, decidedly no Emersonian transcendentalist but rather a pious agnostic, clearly practices what Emerson prefers, within, to be sure, a quite different set of Ultimate Sacred Postulates. His religiously unsettling poem, “Church Going,” begins in a startling way: “Once I am sure there’s nothing going on/I step inside, letting the door thud shut.” But what then? What happens? “It pleases me to stand in silence here.” Something is made present here. Larkin is made present to himself—sees himself made present—in the deepest existential sense. The empty church becomes for Larkin a focusing lens, a polydimensional Polanyian symbol for the clarification and raising of his sense of existing in a complex, historically laden, meaning field. “A serious house on serious earth it is,/In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,/Are recognized, and robed as destinies.” Churchgoing, when nothing is going on, is clearly a ritual (indeed, a compulsion) for Larkin, as sitting was for Emerson and, indeed, for many others in very different traditions. It, too, is a kind of contemplative and hermeneutical practice in which we situate ourselves over against, and access, the worlds projected in Ultimate Sacred Postulates embodied in the objective forms of the ‘churches.’ It establishes and sustains a relationship, a mode of attending. It is an instance of self-giving.

More generally, attention, as Simone Weil pointed out, roots out evil, understood as indifference to truth or intrinsic meaning or as the subjecting of all meaning and value to the demands of an autonomous ego. “Every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves” (Weil 1951, 66). The object of such an attending, to the degree that it is grasped as ‘true,’ becomes the “image of something precious” (73). Every fragment of truth becomes “a pure image of the unique, eternal and living Truth” (73), for Weil the Ultimate Sacred Postulate. Indeed, even “every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament” (73).

These movements to what, from the anthropological point of view, would be considered ‘thin’ or individual rituals do not, I think, make superfluous the ‘thick’ social and formalized rituals, publicly performed, that are Rappaport’s and the anthropological tradition’s main concern, but they certainly do not make them, at least in their traditional religious forms, indispensable. In fact, they exemplify the same embodied logic as the hermeneutically and existentially thick rituals that Polanyi’s notions of symbolization and embodiment allow us to access. It is this logic that defines ritual in its own right.

The socially ‘thinner’ forms of ritual, strangely enough, leave us no place to hide and demand from us a profound personal commitment. Any configuration
of actions, words, objects, or places can become an instrument for enabling, conditioning, and eliciting performances of self-meaning, of self-giving integrations. Their semiotic density and formal structure derive from any configuration's *iconic* power to mirror and project in rich imaginative structures our deepest human concerns, its *indexical* power to affect us in our existential depth, and its *symbolic* power to locate and define us within a universal and ultimate conceptual system. In this way, informed by the analytical lenses of Rappaport and Polanyi, we can see the scope, truth, and general pertinence of Iris Murdoch's contention that ritual is "an outer framework which both occasions and identifies an inner event" (Murdoch 1970, 16).

REFERENCES


